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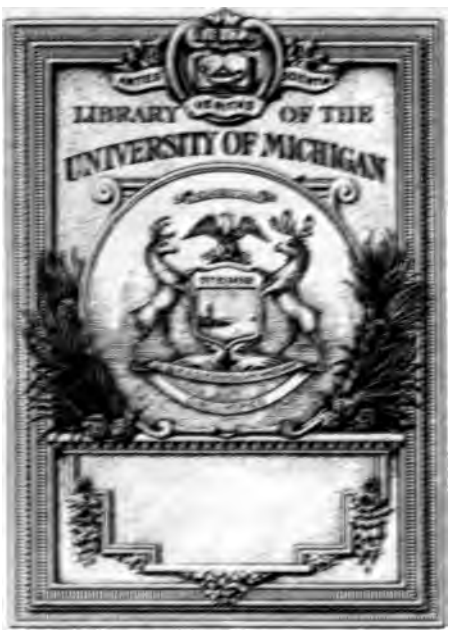

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WORLD'S END.

WORLD'S END.

A Story

IN THREE BOOKS.

BY

RICHARD JEFFERIES.

"I made me great works: I builded me houses: I planted me vineyards."—Ecclus.

BOOK I.—FACTS.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
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WORLD'S END.

BOOK I.

FACTS.

CHAPTER I.

IT is not generally known that the mighty city of Stirmingham owes its existence to a water-rat. Stirmingham has a population of half a million, and is the workshop of the earth. It is a proud city, and its press-men have traced its origin back into the dim vista of the past, far before Alfred the Great's time, somewhere in the days of those monarchs who came from Troy, and whose deeds Holinshed so minutely chronicles.

But this is all trash and nonsense, and is a cunning device of the able editors aforesaid, who confound — for their own purposes—the city proper with the tiny hamlet of Wolf's Glow. This little village or cluster of houses, which now forms a part, and the dirtiest part, of the city, can indeed be traced through Hundred Rolls, Domesday Book, and Saxon Charters, almost down to the time of the Romans. But Stirmingham, the prosperous and proud Stirmingham, which thinks that the world could not exist without its watches and guns, its plated goods, its monster factories and mills, which sends cargoes to Timbuctoo, and supplies Java and Malabar with idols—this vast place, whose nickname is a by-word for cheating, for fair outward show and no real solidity, owes its existence to a water-rat. This is a fact. And it happened in this way.

Once upon a time there was a wide expanse of utterly useless land, flat as this

sheet of paper, without a trace of subsoil or any kind of earth in which so much as a blade of grass could grow. It was utterly dry and sterile—not a tree nor a shrub to shelter a cow or a horse, and all men avoided it as a waste and desolate place. It was the very abomination of desolation, and no one would have been surprised to have seen satyrs and other strange creatures diverting themselves thereon. Around one edge of this plain there flowed a brook, so small that one could hardly call it by that name. A dainty lady from Belgravia could have easily stepped across it without soiling the sole of her boot.

At one spot beside this brook there grew a willow tree. This tree was a picture in itself, and would have made the fortune of any artist who would have condescended to make a loving study of it. The trunk had been of very large size, but now resembled a canoe standing upon end, for nearly one half had decayed, and the crumbling wood

had disappeared, leaving a hollow stem. The stem was itself dead and decaying, except one thin streak of green, up which the golden sap of life still ran, and invigorated the ancient head of the tree to send forth yellow buds and pointed leaves. Up one side of the hollow trunk an ivy creeper had climbed to the top, and was fast hanging festoons from bough to bough.

In the vast mass of decaying wood at the top or head of the tree a briar had taken root—its seed no doubt dropped by some thrush—and its prickly shoots hung over and drooped to the ground in luxuriance of growth. The hardy fern had also found a lodging here, and its dull green leaves, which they say grow most by moonlight, formed a species of crown to the dying tree.

This willow was the paradise of such birds as live upon insects, for they abounded in the decaying wood; and at the top a wild pigeon had built its nest. As years went by, the willow bent more and more over the

brook. The water washing the soil out from between its roots formed a hollow space, where a slight eddy scooped out a deeper hole, in which the vermillion - throated stickleback or minnow disported and watched the mouth of its nest. This eddy also weakened the tree by undermining it at its foundation. The ivy grew thicker till it formed a perfect bush upon the top, and this in the winter afforded a hold for the wind to shake the tree by. The wind would have passed harmlessly through the slender branches, but the ivy, even in winter, the season of storms, left something against which it could rage with effect. Finally came the water-rat.

If Stirmingham objects to owe its origin to a water-rat, it may at least congratulate itself upon the fact that it was a good old English rat—none of your modern parvenu, grey Hanoverian rascals. It was, in fact, before the Norwegian rat, which had been imported in the holds of vessels, had

obtained undisputed sway over the country. It had, however, already driven the darker aboriginal inhabitants away from the cultivated places to take refuge in the woods and streams. It is odd that in the animal kingdom also, even in the rat economy, the darker hued race should give way to the lighter. However, as in Stirmingham the smoke is so great that the ladies when they walk abroad carry parasols up to keep the blacks from falling on and disfiguring their complexion, there can after all be no disgrace in the water-rat ancestry.

This dark coloured water-rat, finding his position less and less secure at the adjacent barn on account of the attacks of the grey invaders, one fine day migrated, with Mrs. Rat and all the Master and Missy rats, down to the stream. Peeping and sniffing about for a pleasant retreat, he chose the neighbourhood of the willow tree. I cannot stay here to discuss whether or no he was led to the tree by some mystic beckoning

hand—some supernatural presentiment; but to the tree he went, and Stirmingham was founded. Two or three burrows—small round holes—sufficed to house Mr. Rat and his family, but these ran right under the willow, and of course still further weakened it.

In course of time the family flourished exceedingly, and Mr. Rat became a great-great-great-grandpapa to ever so many minor Frisky Tails. These Frisky Tails finding the ancient quarter too much straightened for comfort, began to scratch further tunnels, and succeeded pretty well in opening additional honeycombs, till presently progress was stayed by a root of the tree. Now they had gnawed through and scratched away half a dozen other roots, and never paused to sniff more particularly at this than the others. But it so happened that this root was the one which supplied the green streak up the trunk of the tree with the golden sap of life drawn by

mysterious chemical processes from the earth. Frisky Tails gnawed this root asunder, and cut off the supply of sap. The green streak up the trunk withered and died, and the last stay of the willow was gone. It only remained for the first savage south-wester of winter to finish the mischief.

The south-wester came, and over went the trunk, crash across the brook. At first this was very awkward for the rats, as thereby most of their subterranean dwellings became torn up and exposed. But very soon a geological change occurred.

The tree had fallen obliquely across the stream, and its ponderous head, or top, choked up the bed, or very nearly. The sand and small sticks, leaves, and so on, brought down by the current, filled up the crevices left by the tree, and a perfect dam was formed.

Now, as stated before, the ground thereabout was nearly level, and so worthless in character that no man ever troubled

his head about it. No one came to see the dam or remove it. The result was the brook overflowed, and then finding this level plateau, instead of eating out a new channel, it spread abroad, and formed first a good-sized puddle, then a pond, then something like a flood, and, as time went by, a marsh. This marsh extended over a space of ground fully a mile long, and altogether covered some nine hundred acres.

The rats, sagacious creatures, instead of deserting their colony, showed that they possessed that species of wisdom which the Greek sage said was superior to all other knowledge—namely, the knowledge how to turn an evil to a good. Exploring this shallow lake which their carelessness had caused, they found several places still unsubmerged—islands, in fact. To one of these they swam, dug out new catacombs, and being now quite safe from interruption, and protected upon all sides, the Malthusian laws of population had full play, and soon

proved its force, for the whole place swarmed with them. The axiom, however, that at the very point when empires are apparently most prosperous, their destruction is near at hand, to some extent applied even to the dominion of the water-rat. They were no longer to be the sole undisturbed possessors.

Arguing *à priori*, one would have concluded that if this waste land was worthless before, now it was a marsh, and miasmatic vapours arose from it, it would be still more avoided. But the facts were exactly opposite. So soon as ever the water had spread over the level plain, and had well soaked into the sterile soil, there began to spring up tough aquatic grasses, commonly called bull-polls, from a supposed resemblance between their tangled appearance and the rough hair that hangs over the poll of a bull.

These grasses are gregarious—that is to say, they prefer to grow in huge bunches. Each bunch increasing year after year,

forms in time a small hillock or tuft, and, the roots spreading and spreading, these hillocks of grass almost covered the lake, leaving only narrow channels of water between. Upon these innumerable frogs and toads crawled up out of the water, and they were the chosen resorts of newts.

In summer time the blue dragon-fly wheeled in mazes over them, or, while settled on the stiff blades of grass, looked like a species of blossom. The current of the brook brought down seeds, and soon the tall reed began to rear its slender stem, and rustle its feathery head in the breeze. The sedges came also, and fringed the marsh with a border of green.

Meantime, the root which the rats had gnawed asunder beneath the ancient willow-tree, felt the power of spring, and made one more effort. Freed from the incubus of the dead trunk, it threw out a shoot of its own. From this shoot there proceeded other shoots; and, in short, after a while the

islands in the marsh became covered with willow trees and osier-beds. The reeds grew apace, and by the time the islands were clothed with willow, the rest of the marsh was occupied by them, saving only the fringe of sedge, and the almost immortal bull-polls, which were as tough as leather, and which nothing could kill.

Now, also, animal life began to people the once-deserted waste. With the sedges came the sedge-warblers; with the willows came the brook-sparrows; and above all, came the wild-fowl. The heron stalked to and fro between the bull-polls; the ducks swam in and out; the moor-hens took up their residence; and in winter the widgeons and snipes visited the place in myriads.

It was now time for man. And man came. He came first in the person of here and there a cotter, who cut himself a huge bundle of reeds for fuel, to mend his thatch, or litter his pig; then in the person of the poacher—if it could be called poaching to hunt where

no one preserved—who, with long-barrelled gun, brass-fitted and flint-locked, brought down half a dozen ducks at once, and then waded in after them.

One day a travelling gipsy-tribe came by, and encamped for the night close to the marsh. In this tribe there was a man who, in his way, possessed the genius of Alexander the Great. Alexander chancing to pass a landlocked harbour utterly neglected, saw at a glance its capabilities, and built a city which is renowned to this day.

This gipsy fellow, who was only a gipsy by marriage, saw this unoccupied marsh, with its wild-fowl, its fish, and, above all, its willows, and at once fixed upon it as a promising spot.

He was a basket-maker by trade.

He waded in to one of the islets, carrying his infant in his arms, and followed by his wife, who carried his tools. He set up his tent-pole, and in time superseded it with a cottage of sod, roofed with

reeds. All day he made baskets of willow and flags, in the evening he shot ducks and widgeon. The baskets he sold in the towns, the ducks he ate. One or two others followed his example.

The gipsy tribe made it a rule to come that way twice a year to purchase the baskets and retail them all over the country. The original settlers had sons, and the sons took possession of other islets, built sod cottages, or wattle-and-dab, and married wives, till there were ten or twelve settlements upon the islands; and these ten or twelve, all in a rude sort of way, gave the chieftainship to the original basket-maker, whose name happened to be Baskette.

These people, in the heart of a midland county, lived almost exactly the life that was led at the same period by the dwellers in the fen countries to the eastward. It was a rude existence, but it was free and independent, and not without a charm to

those who had been born and bred in it. Even this unenviable life was, however, to be disturbed. Two mighty giants were preparing, like the ogres in the fairy tales, to eat up the defenceless population. The lid of a certain tea-kettle had puffed up and down, and Steam had been born. The other ogre was called Legal Rights, and began to bite first.

CHAPTER II.

SO long as this waste land was tenanted only by the "owl and the bittern," Legal Rights slumbered. The moment man put his foot upon it the ogre woke up, for it is not permitted to that miserable two-legged creature to rest in peace anywhere in this realm.

The village of Wolf's Glow was distant about a mile and a quarter from the old willow tree whose fall had dammed up the brook and caused the marsh. The brook, in fact, ran past the village, and supplied more than one farmhouse with water. These farms were of the poorest class—mere stretches of pasture-land, and such pasture which a well-fed donkey would despise!

The poorest farm, in appearance at all

events, was Wick—a large but tumbledown place, roofed with grey slates, which stood apart from the village. It was the largest house in the place, and yet seemed the most poverty-stricken. The grey slates were falling off. The roof-tree had cracked and bent, the lattice windows were broken, and the holes stuffed up with bundles of hay and straw. The garden was choked with weeds, and the very apple trees in the orchard were withering away.

Old Sibbold, the owner and occupier, was detested by the entire village, and by no one more than his two sons. He was a miser, and yet nothing seemed to prosper with him; and pare and save as much as he would he could make no accumulation. His sons were the only labourers he employed, though his farm was the largest thereabouts, and he paid them only in lodging and food, and not much of the latter.

The eldest, Arthur, chafed bitterly under

this treatment, for he appears, from the scanty records that remain of him, to have been a lad of spirit and energy.

The second son, James, was of a grosser nature, and his mind was chiefly occupied with eating and drinking. He had an implicit faith in the wealth of his father, and submitted patiently to all these hardships and rough treatment in the hope of ingratiating himself with the old man, and perhaps supplanting Arthur in his will—that is, so far as his money was concerned, for the land, as the villagers said, "went by heirship"—*i.e.*, was entailed—but who would care for such land?

Arthur saw the game and did nothing to prevent it; on the contrary, he took a certain pleasure in irritating the savage and morose old man, whom he thoroughly despised. Perhaps what happened in the future was a punishment for this unfilial conduct, however much it was provoked.

The mother, it must be understood, had

long been dead, and there was no mediator between the stern old man and his fiery-tempered son. Old Sibbold was descended of a good family—one that had once held a position, not only in the county but in the country—and he dwelt much on the past, recalling the time when a Sibbold had held a bishop a prisoner for King John.

He pored over the deeds in his old oak chest—a press, which stood on four carved legs, and was closed with a ponderous padlock. That chest, if it could be found now, would be worth its weight, not in gold merely, but in diamonds. At that time these deeds and parchments were of little value; they related mostly to by-gone days, and Arthur ridiculed his father's patient study of their crabbed handwriting.

What was the use of dwelling on the past?—up and speculate on the present!

Irritated beyond measure, old Sibbold would reply that half the county belonged

to him, and he could prove it. All that they could see from that window was his.

"Why," said Arthur, "all we can see is the Lea, which is as barren as the crown of my hat, except in weeds and bulrushes!"

"Barren or not, they're mine," said Sibbold, closing his chest; "and I will make those squatters pay!"

For the Lea was that piece of waste ground which the brook had overflowed, and in a sense rendered fertile.

From that hour began a persecution of the basket-makers who had settled on the little islets in the marsh. Sibbold had an undoubted parchment right—whether he had a moral and true right to a place he had never touched with spade or plough is a different matter. He claimed a rent. The cotters refused to pay. Their chieftain, old Will Baskette, wanted to compromise matters, and offered a small quit-rent.

Now every one knows that quit-rent and rent are very different things in a legal

point of view. A man who pays rent can be served with notice to quit. A man who pays quit-rent has a claim upon the soil, and cannot be ejected. Sibbold refused the quit-rent, and had the squatters served with a notice. They went on cutting reeds, weaving baskets, and shooting wild-fowl, just the same; till one day old Sibbold, accompanied with a posse of constables (there were no police in those days), walked into the marsh with his jack-boots on; and, while one of the cotters was absent selling his baskets, began to tear the little hut down, despite the curses of the women and the wailing of the children. But the hut, as it happened, was stronger in reality than appearance, and resisted the attack, till one of the constables suggested fire.

A burning brand from the cottage hearth was applied by old Sibbold himself to the reed thatch, and in a moment up shot a fierce blaze which left nothing but ashes, and sod walls two feet high. One can

imagine the temper a man of gipsy blood would be in when, on returning home, he found his children crying and the women silent, sitting among the ruins. From that hour a spirit of revenge took possession of the dwellers in this Dismal Swamp of hostility to the village.

Hitherto these half savage people had paid of their own free will a kind of tribute to the regular house-folk of Wolf's Glow. The farmers' wives received useful presents of baskets and clothes-pegs, and every now and then half a dozen wild ducks were found on the threshold in the morning. The clergyman was treated in a similar manner; and being known to have a penchant for snipes and woodcocks, his table was well supplied in the season. Sometimes there were other things left in a mysterious way at the door—such as a bladder full of the finest brandy or Hollands gin, or a packet of tobacco or snuff.

This was generally after the visit of the

gipsy tribe, who were smugglers to a considerable extent. No farmer ever missed a lamb or a horse: such property was far safer since the settlement of the Dismal Swamp.

But now the village had attacked the Swamp, the Swamp retaliated on the village, and a regular war commenced. The farmers' sheep began to disappear—none so often as old Sibbold's. Once a valuable horse of his was lost. This drove him to the verge of frenzy. He went down to the Swamp, and presently returned swearing and vowing vengeance—he had been shot at. This aroused the clergyman into action. He went to the Swamp, and was received with respect. He talked of conciliation, and reproved them, especially speaking of the sin of murder. They listened, but utterly scouted the idea.

"We steal," they said, openly. "It is our revenge; but we do not murder. Sibbold was not fired at. One of our young men was seeking ducks—he did not know that Sibbold at the same moment was creeping

noiselessly through the reeds to fire our huts. He shot at the ducks, and some of the pellets glanced off Sibbold's jack-boots. That's the truth."

And it was the truth. But Sibbold vowed vengeance, and was heard to say that he would have their blood. He refused to see the clergyman who came to mediate and explain. He accused him of complicity, and reviled him.

James, as usual, agreed with and seconded him. Arthur sided with the squatters, and said so openly. Sibbold cursed him. Arthur said pointedly that when he inherited the land the squatters should be unmolested. Sibbold struck him with an ash stick.

Arthur left the house and went to the Swamp. He called on old Will Baskette, and expressed his hatred of his father's tyranny. He asked to be taught to make baskets, and to be initiated into the gipsy mysteries. He was a quick lad, and they

took an interest in teaching him. He soon knew how to make two or three kinds of baskets, learnt the gipsy language, and imbibed their singular traditions.

Meantime the war continued. At first the farmers and villagers put up with patience with their thefts, considering that it was Sibbold's fault. But repeated losses exasperated them. If one of the Dismal Swamp people was seen abroad he was set upon and maltreated, beaten black and blue. Savage dogs were hounded at them. Sibbold was encouraged to eject them. He tried to get a posse of constables to do so, but the constables hung back. They had heard the story of the shooting at Sibbold; they knew these men to be desperate characters; and most of them had had presents of brandy and tobacco, and ribbons for their wives.

They could not be got to move. That was a lawless age in outlying places. Finding this, the village began to contemplate a raid *en masse* upon the Swamp. Nothing

was talked of in the alehouse but fighting. Men compared the length of their gun-barrels, and put up marks to prove the range of their shot. The younger men were ready for the fray, the elders hesitated. They looked at their thatched houses, at their barns and ricks. The insurance companies had not then penetrated into the most obscure nooks and corners.

After all, the Swamp people were not unsupported: they were a branch of a tribe. If they were seriously injured the tribe might return, and no one could calculate the consequences.

So the foray was put off from day to day. But the news that it was meditated soon reached the Swamp, and made the dwellers there more desperate than ever. Their thefts grew to such a height that nothing was safe. The geese and turkeys disappeared; wheat was stolen from the barns; sheep were taken by the dozen, and no trace could be found. Now and then a horse dis-

appeared. It came to such a pitch that the very beer in the barrels, the cider in the cellar, was not safe, but was taken nightly.

Old Sibbold, of course, suffered most. Tapping a cider barrel, he found it quite empty. The old man was beside himself with rage; but he said nothing. He studied retaliation. He watched his barns —the wheat seemed to disappear under his very eyes. One night as he was returning from his barn, carrying his long-barrelled flint-lock under his arm, he fancied he saw a gleam of light in the ivy, which almost hid the cellar window. Stealthily he peeped through. There was a man stooping down, drawing off the cider from a barrel into a bucket.

Old Sibbold's lips compressed; a fire came into his eyes. He grasped his gun. Just then the thief held up the candle in his left hand, and revealed the features of old Will Baskette, the very chief of the Swamp. Sibbold hated him more particu-

larly because he knew that Arthur frequented his hut. Up went the long gun. The gleam of light from the candle guided the aim. The muzzle was close to the lattice window. A cruel eye glanced along the barrel, a finger was on the trigger. The flint struck the steel with a sharp snick—a spark flew out—an explosion—the window-glass smashed—a cloud of smoke—one groan, and all was still.

Sibbold rushed round the house, opened the door gently, locked it behind him, and stole upstairs. On the landing he met his youngest son James. For a moment they looked at one another. The young man spoke first.

"Quick, and load your gun," he said. "Then put it in the rack and get into bed. Give me your breeches."

They wore breeches and gaiters in those days.

The old man did as he was bid. The gun was put in the rack; old Sibbold got

into bed. James took his breeches, poured a bucket of water on them, and hung them up in the wide chimney—the embers still glowed on the hearth. Then he stole upstairs.

"Arthur is out," he whispered, as he passed the old man's bedroom.

Ten minutes passed. Then there arose clatter of feet and a shouting.

"Farmer! farmer! your house is a-fire. The thatch be caught alight."

James opened the window, yawned, and asked what was the matter.

"Father's asleep," he said, as if not comprehending them. "He got wet in the brook, and went to bed early. Can't ye come in the morning?"

But the others soon roused the house.

The thatch had indeed caught over the cellar-window; but fortunately it was nearly covered with moss and weeds, and was easily put out.

Then some one noticed the smashed win-

dow. "Who was it fired?" they asked. "We heard a shot, and thought it was the swampers. We were watching our sheep and barns. Then we saw this fire in your thatch, and ran. Who was it fired? How came the window smashed like this? How came the thatch alight?" James answered, "He really did not know. He had heard no shot, he slept sound, knew nothing of the thatch being on fire, and they would have been burnt in their beds if it had not been for their kind neighbours." Old Sibbold stood and shivered in his shirt, his breeches were wet. The neighbours came in.

"I'll go upstairs and fetch father a blanket to wrap his knees in," said James. "Father, thee blow the embers up; John Andrews, thee knows where the cellar is: give 'em the key, father, and do you go, John, and draw some cider."

Away went John Andrews with the lantern, and came back with a face white as

a sheet, just as James got downstairs. There was a dead man in the cellar, in a flood of gore and cider!

The result was a coroner's inquiry; the thefts and so forth might have gone on for ever, but death could not be disregarded. Even in that lawless age, death was attended to. An inquest was held, and the jury was composed of the farmers of the village. Suspicion fell very strongly upon old Sibbold. The Swamp people openly denounced him as the murderer. His neighbours, much as they hated the Swamp, believed in their hearts that they were right; and not all their class prejudice could overcome the innate horror they felt in his presence. More than one had heard him say he would have blood. Now there was blood enough.

Still there was not enough evidence to arrest Sibbold. The Swamp people said he would run away, and if he did they would watch him and bring him back. But Sib-

bold did nothing of the kind. He faced the inquiry with a stern dignity which imposed on some.

First came the medical evidence. The doctor proved that the shot had entered the left side, just below the heart, and had passed downwards. It had entered all together—the pellets not spread about, but close together, like a bullet, which proved that the gun had been fired very close. Death must have been absolutely instantaneous. Deceased was in a stooping posture when he received the charge.

The constable who had examined the premises, declared it as his belief—as, indeed, it was the belief of everyone present—that the shot had been fired from without the window. The shot itself could not have smashed every pane—that was the concussion. The thatch had been doubtless set on fire by a piece of the paper which had been used as wadding.

When this had been said there was

nothing more to be done, at least so the jury thought. Suspect Sibbold as much as they would, they were determined to protect him if possible. This was partly class-feeling, and partly remembrance of the provocation.

But the Coroner was not to be put off so easily. He had Sibbold called, and questioned him closely. He called James also, but they both stuck to their tale; they had never heard the shot, &c. The Coroner sent for Sibbold's gun, keeping Sibbold and James at the inn where the inquest was held meantime. It was brought. It told no tales: it was loaded. Finally, the Coroner, still dissatisfied and vaguely suspicious, called *Arthur* Sibbold, who, white as a sheet, was sitting near on a bench watching the proceedings.

He started at his name and looked round, but finally came forward. Where had he been that night? He was at Bassett, a small town six miles distant. What was

his business there? what time did he leave? and so on. Arthur answered, but not so clearly as was desired. He contradicted himself as to the time at which he left Bassett, and got confused.

The Coroner's suspicions shifted upon him. He must have arrived about the time the shot was heard, yet he did not go indoors, did not show himself till breakfast-time next morning. James vouched for that, unasked. What was he doing all night?

Suspicion fell very strong on Arthur. But at this moment the wife of the deceased started forward and declared her belief in his innocence, recounting how he had learnt basket-making, &c., of the dead man, and they had been on the most friendly terms.

Still, said the Coroner, he might have mistaken his man in the uncertain light. Had he a gun? It was shown that the three Sibbolds had but one gun; that

Arthur never used a gun, being of a tender nature, and often expressing his dislike to see birds wantonly slaughtered.

The Sibbolds were then, with the other witnesses, ordered out, and the Coroner addressed the jury.

He told them plainly where his suspicions lay: one of the Sibbolds, he was certain, did the deed, but which? Two were in bed, or at least were to all appearance in bed, and one point in their favour was that the thatch was alight. Now, if they had known that, they would hardly have lain till the neighbours came up. The third was out that night, and, according to his own showing, must have returned about the time the murder was committed. But in his favour it was urged that he was on the best of terms with the deceased; that he had no gun of his own; that he disliked the use of a gun. He said much more, but these were the chief points, and particularly he laid down the law. They must not

imagine because a man was stealing that thereby his life was at any one's mercy. If a struggle took place, and the thief was killed in the struggle, there were then several loopholes of escape from the penalty of the law. First, it might be called chance-medley; next, there would be a doubt whether the stab or shot was not given in self-defence, and was not intended to kill. But in this case there was every appearance of deliberate murder. The thief had been spied at the cask; the murderer had coolly aimed along his gun and fired, hitting his man in a vital part, evidently of design and aforethought.

He then left the jury to their deliberations. They talked it over half an hour in a sullen manner, and then *returned an open verdict*—"Found dead." The Coroner remonstrated, and recommended that at least it should be "Wilful murder against persons unknown," but they were obstinate.

That verdict stands to this day. The

dread spectre of the gallows vanished from Wolf's Glow. Old Will Baskette was buried in the churchyard, and his funeral was attended by the whole of the Swamp people and half the village. And over their ale the farmers whispered that it served the old thief right, but they avoided old Sibbold. The work of the rats had already brought fruit in bloodshed.

CHAPTER III.

IN these days such a verdict and such an ending to a tragedy would be out of the question; but there were no police in those times to take up a case if it chanced to slip by the Coroner. Once past the Coroner, and the criminal was practically safe. The county officers were never in a hurry for such prosecutions, for a gallows cost at least 300*l*. They wanted a public prosecutor then ten times more than we do now. Sibbold was shunned by the very men who had acquitted him; but there is no reason to suppose he ever felt remorse. He was made of that kind of stuff of which the men in armour, his ancestors, were composed, who thought little or nothing of human life. But one day he met Arthur, his eldest son, face to face upon the stairs. It was

the first time they had met since the inquest—Arthur had avoided the place, and wandered about a good deal by himself, till some simple folk began to think that it was he who had committed the deed, and that his conscience was troubling him.

This meeting on the stairs took place by accident one morning—Sibbold was going to pass, but Arthur put his hand on his shoulder, "I saw you do it," he said. He had just entered the rick yard when the shot was fired. He had held his peace, but his mind could not rest. "I cannot stay here," he said, "I am going. I shall never see you again."

Old Sibbold stood like a stone; but presently put his hand in his pocket and held out his purse.

"No," said Arthur; "not a penny of that, it would be blood money."

He went, and evil report went after him. Perhaps it was James who fanned the flame, but for years afterwards it was always

believed that Arthur had shot the basket-maker. Only the Swamp people combated the notion. Arthur was one of them, and understood their language—it was impossible. Not to have to return to these times, it will be, perhaps, best to at once finish with old Sibbold; though the event did not really happen till some time after Arthur's departure.

Sibbold went to a fair at some twenty miles distance—a yearly custom of his; and returning home in the evening, he was met by highwaymen, it is supposed, and refusing to give up his money bag, was shot. At all events his horse came home riderless, and the body of the old man was found on the heath divested of every article of value. Suspicion at once fell on his known enemies, the Swamp people. Their cottages were searched and nothing found. Their men were interrogated, but had all been either at home or in another direction. Calm reason put down Sibbold's

death to misadventure with highwaymen, common enough in those times; but there were those who always held that it was done in revenge, as it was believed that the gipsies retained the old vendetta creed.

As Arthur did not return, James took possession, and went on as usual; but he did not disturb the Swamp settlement. He avoided them, and they avoided him.

When Will Baskette was shot he left a widow and two sons, one of them was strong and hardy, the other, about sixteen, was delicate and unfit for rough outdoor life. This fact was well known to the clergyman at Wolf's Glow, the Rev. Ralph Boteler, who was really a benevolently-minded man.

The widow and her eldest son joined the gipsy tribe and abandoned the Swamp. The Rev. Ralph Boteler took the delicate Romy Baskette into his service as man of all work, meaning to help in the garden and clean the parson's nag. Romy could not

read, and the parson taught him—also to write. Being quiet and good-looking, the lad won on the vicar, who after a time found himself taking a deep interest in the friendless orphan. It ended in Romy leaving the garden and the stable, and being domiciled in the studio, where the parson filled his head with learning, not forgetting Latin and Greek.

The vicar was a single man, middle-aged, with very little thought beyond his own personal comfort, except that he liked to see the hounds throw off, being too stout to follow them. He had, however, one hobby; and, like other men who are moderate enough upon other topics, he was violence itself upon this. Of all the hobbies in the world, this parson's fancy was geology—then just beginning to emerge as a real science.

The neighbours thought the vicar was as mad as a March hare on this one point. He grubbed up the earth in forty places

with a small mattock he had made on purpose at the village blacksmith's. He broke every stone in the district with a hammer which the same artisan made for him.

His craze was that the neighbourhood of Wolf's Glow was rich in the two great stores of nature which make countries powerful—*i.e.*, in Coal and Iron. He proved it in twenty ways. First, the very taste of the water, and the colour of the earth in the streams; by the nodules of dark, heavy stone which abounded; by the oily substance often found floating on the surface of ponds—rock oil; by the strata and the character of the fossils; by actual analysis of materials picked up by himself; lastly, by archæology.

Wolf's Glow! What was the meaning of that singular name? The only Glow in the county. Wolf was, perhaps, a man's name in the centuries since. But Glow? Glow was, without a doubt, the ancient British for *coal*.

The people who argued against him—and they were all he met—ridiculed the idea of the ancient Britons knowing anything of coal. Boteler produced his authorities to show that they, and their conquerors the Romans, were perfectly familiar with that mineral. Wolf's Glow was, in fact, Wolf's Coal Pit. "Very well," said the Objectors, "show us the coal-pit, and we'll believe." This the vicar could not do, and was held to be mad accordingly.

But all this talking, and searching, and analysing made a deep impression upon the mind of young Romy Baskette, who was now hard upon twenty years of age. Boteler, really desirous of pushing the lad on, sent him to London, whither Arthur Sibbold had preceded him, and placed him, at a high premium, in the care of a friend of his, who was in the iron trade. Romy grew and prospered, and being of a serious disposition saved all the money he could lay hands on. Presently old Boteler died,

and left him, not all, but a great share of his worldly wealth. With this he bought a share in the iron business, and became a partner. Wealth rolled in upon him, and at an early period of life he retired from active labour, married, and bought an estate a few miles from Wolf's Glow.

In his leisure hours the memory of the old days with the vicar returned. He resolved to test the vicar's theory. He purchased a small piece of land in Wolf's Glow parish, sank a shaft, and sure enough came upon *coal.*

This discovery revivified the whole man. He cast off sloth, forgot all about retirement, and plunged into business again. Another search, conducted by practical hands, proved the existence of iron.

There was a *furore.* Collieries were started; iron furnaces set going. It was just at the dawn of the great iron and coal trade. The railways had been started, and the demand was greater than the sup-

ply. Romy Baskette and Company soon employed two thousand hands coal-digging and iron-smelting. The man, in fact, wore himself out at the trade of money-making. He could not rest. Night and day his brain was at work. An accidental conversation with one of his workmen suggested to him a new idea. The smiths of the time could not make nails fast enough for all the building that was going on. This workman had been a sailor in his day, and had seen nails abroad which were made in batches by machinery, instead of slowly and laboriously, one by one, by hand.

Baskette caught at the idea. He studied and learnt what he could. He made a voyage himself abroad, and soon mastered the secret. He erected machinery, and *cut* nails were first made. The consumption was enormous. The business of this Baskette and Company became so large that it almost passed out of control. Meantime other

firms had come and settled, bought land, dug up coal, and set up smelting furnaces. In ten years the population from being absolutely nil rose to thirty-five thousand people. By this time Romy had killed himself. But that mattered little, for he had left a son, and a son who inherited all his genius, and was if anything still "harder in the mouth." He was named, from his mother's family, Sternhold Baskette.

Sternhold picked up the plough-handle which had dropped from his father's grasp, and continued the good work, never once looking back. But although equally clever, the bent of his genius was different from that of old Romy. Romy was at heart a speculator, and believed in personal property. Sternhold was a Conservative, and put his faith in real property, houses, and land. He kept up the old forges and collieries, but he started no new ones. He invested the money in land and houses,

particularly the latter. His life may be summed up in two strokes of genius—the first was bringing the iron horse to Stirmingham, as the new town was called; the second was the building lease investment.

It is hard to give the pre-eminence to either. They were both profound schemes —neither would have been complete without the other. He did not originate the idea of the railway—that was done for him—but he put it on its legs, and he brought it to the centre of the town.

The original scheme almost omitted Stirmingham. Railways were not then fully understood; their projectors had such vast ideas in their heads, they aimed at long trunk lines, and so this railroad was to connect London, the sea, and a certain large town—larger than Stirmingham then, but now nothing beside the modern city.

Sternhold, as the largest shareholder, and as finding the capital to get through Parliament, prevailed to have the course altered

so as to sweep by Stirmingham. He knew that this would improve his property there at least fifty per cent. But he had other ideas in his head. The line could not be finished under three years, and in those three years it was his intention to become possessed of the whole ground upon which the town of Stirmingham stood. He foresaw that it would become a mighty centre. He braced up his nerves, and prepared to spend his darling hoards like water.

One by one the fields, the plots, the houses, became his; and the greed growing on him, he cast longing eyes on the adjacent marsh, now called Glow's Lea.

The solicitors he employed tried to restrain his infatuation. They represented to him that even his vast wealth could not sustain this more than kingly expenditure, and as to the marsh, it was sheer madness to purchase it. In vain. Perhaps a tinge of pride had something to do with it. He would buy up the rotten old Swamp where

his progenitor had dwelt, drain it, and cover it with mansions.

But now came a difficulty—the title to the ground was not all that could be wished. James had been dead some years, but it was well known that had Arthur returned—if Arthur still lived, or his heirs—that James had no right. He had enjoyed the farm and the land, such as it was, unmolested, all his life. He had married, and had eight sons. Six of these had married since, and most of them had children.

As none could claim the property, they all found a miserable livelihood upon it, somehow or other. They had degenerated into a condition little better than that of the squatters in the Swamp.

Three families lived in the farmhouse, constantly quarrelling; two made their dwelling in the cowsheds, slightly improved; one boiled the pot in the great carthouse, and the two single

men slept in the barn. Such a condition of slovenliness and dirt it would be hard to equal. And the language, the fighting, and the immorality are better left undescribed! The clergyman of Wolf's Glow wished them further.

To these wretches the offers of Sternhold Baskette came like the promised land. He held out 300*l.* apiece, on condition that they would jointly sign the deed and then go to America. They jumped at it. The solicitor warned Baskette that the contract was not sound. He asked, in reply, if any one could produce the deed under which the property descended by "heirship." No one could. Somehow or other it had been lost.

In less than a month eight Sibbolds, with their wives and families, were *en route* to the United States, and Sternhold took possession. Then came the Swamp settlement difficulty.

At first Baskette thought of carrying

matters with a high hand. The squatters said they had lived there for two generations, or nearly so, and had paid no rent. They had a right. Sternhold remembered that they were of his clan. He gave them the same terms as the Sibbolds—and they took them. Three hundred pounds to such miserable wretches seemed an El Dorado.

They signed a deed, and went to America, filling up half a vessel, for there were seventeen heads of families, and children *ad libitum*.

Thus Sternhold bought the farm and the Swamp for 7500*l*. His aim in getting them to America was that no question of right might crop up—for the Cunard line was not then what it is now, and the passage was expensive and protracted. He reckoned that they would spend the money soon after landing, and never have a chance of returning.

Meantime the railway came to a standstill. There had been inflation—vast sums

of promotion money had been squandered in the usual reckless manner, and ruin stared the shareholders in the face. To Sternhold it meant absolute loss of all, and above everything, of prestige.

Already the keen business men of the place began to sneer at him. At any cost the railway must be kept on its legs. He sacrificed a large share of his wealth, and the works recommenced. The old swamp, or marsh, was drained.

Sternhold had determined to make this the Belgravia of Stirmingham, and had the plans prepared accordingly. They were something gigantic in costliness and magnificence. His best friends warned and begged him to desist. No; he would go on. Stirmingham would become the finest city in England, and he should be the richest man in Europe. Up rose palatial mansions, broad streets, splendid club-houses—even the foundations of a theatre were laid. And all this was begun at once.

Otherwise, Sternhold was afraid that the compass of an ordinary life would not enable him to see these vast designs finished. So that one might walk through streets with whole blocks of houses only one story high.

Everything went on swimmingly, till suddenly the mania for speculation which had taken possession of all the kingdom received a sudden check by the failure of a certain famous railway king.

As if by magic, all the mighty works at Stirmingham ceased, and Sternhold grew sombre, and wandered about with dejected step. His friends, men of business, reminded him of their former warnings. He bent his head, bit his lip, and said only, "Wait!"

Meantime the line had been constructed, but was not opened. The metals were down, but the stations were not built, and the locomotives had not arrived. Everybody was going smash. Several collieries failed;

land and houses became cheap. Sternhold invested his uttermost in the same property —bought houses, till he had barely enough to keep him in bread and cheese. Still they laughed and jeered at him, and still he said only, "Wait!"

This place, this swamp, seemed to be fated to demonstrate over and over again at one time the futility of human calculation, and at another what enormous things can be accomplished by the efforts of a clever man.

CHAPTER IV.

THE owner of three parts of Stirmingham—now a monstrous overgrown city, just building a cathedral—actually had nothing but a little bread and cheese for supper. There were people who condoled with him, and offered to lend him sums of money—not large, but very useful to a starving man, one would have thought. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Thank you; I'll wait."

Certain keen speculators tried to come round him in twenty different ways. They represented that all this mass of bricks and mortar—this unfinished Belgravia—really was not worth owning; no one could ever find the coin to finish the plans, and house property had depreciated ninety per cent.

"Very true," said Sternhold. "Good morning, gentlemen."

He held on like grim death. Men of genius always do—mark Cæsar, and all of them. 'Tis the bulldog that wins.

By-and-by things began to take a turn. The markets looked up. Iron and coal got brisker. The first locomotive was put on the line, then another, and another; London could be reached in two hours, goods could be transmitted in six, instead of thirty by the old canal or turnpike.

The Stock Exchange got busy again. You could hear the masons and bricklayers —chink, tink, tinkle, as their trowels chipped off the edges—singing away in chorus. The whistle of the engines was never silent. Vast clouds of smoke hung over the country from the factories and furnaces. Two or three new trades were introduced—among others, the plated goods, cheap jewellery, and idol-making businesses, and trade-guns for Africa. Rents began to rise; in two

years they went up forty per cent. The place got a name throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, and a Name is everything to a town as well as to an individual.

But by a curious contradiction, just as his property began to rise in value, and his investment looked promising, Sternhold grew melancholy and walked about more wretched than ever. The truth soon leaked out—he had no money to complete his half-finished streets and blocks of houses. Nothing could induce him to borrow; not a halfpenny would he take from any man.

There the streets and houses, the theatres, club-houses, magnificent mansions, huge hotels, languished, half-finished, some a story, some two stories high, exposed to wind and weather. In the midst of a great city there was all this desolation, as if an enemy had wreaked his vengeance on this quarter only.

Large as were the sums derived from

his other properties—houses and shops and land, which were occupied—it was all eaten up in the attempt to finish this *marble* Rome in the middle of a brick Babylon. Heavy amounts too had to be disbursed to keep the railway going, for it did not pay a fraction of dividend yet. Men of business pressed on Sternhold. "Let us complete the place," they said. "Sell it to us on building leases; no one man can do the whole. Then we will form three or four companies or syndicates, lease it of you, complete the buildings, and after seventy years the whole will revert to you or your heirs."

Still Sternhold hesitated. At last he did lease a street or two in this way to a company, who went to work like mad, paid the masons and bricklayers double wages, kept them at it day and night, and speedily were paying twenty per cent. dividends on their shares out of the rents of the completed buildings. This caused a rush. Company after company was formed. They gave

Sternhold heavy premiums for the privilege to buy of him; even then it was difficult to get him to grant the leases. When he did accept the terms and the ready cash, every halfpenny of it went to complete streets on his own account; and so he lived, as it were, from hand to mouth.

After all this excitement and rush, after some thousands of workmen were put at it, they did not seem to make much impression upon the huge desolation of brick and mortar. Streets and squares rose up, and still there were acres upon acres of wilderness, foundations half-dug out and full of dirty water, walls three feet high, cellars extending heaven only knew where.

People came for miles to see it, and called it "Baskette's Folly." After a while, however, they carefully avoided it, and called it something worse—*i.e.*, "The Rookery;" for all the scum and ruffianism of an exceptionally scummy and ruffianly residuum chose it as their stronghold. Thieves and

worse—ill-conditioned women—crowds of lads, gipsies, pedlars—the catalogue would be as long as Homer's—took up their residence in these foundations and cellars. They seized on the planks which were lying about in enormous piles, and roofed over the low walls; and where planks would not do they got canvas.

Now, it is well known that this class of people do not do much harm when they are scattered about and separated here, there, and everywhere over a city; but as soon as they are concentrated in one spot, then it becomes serious. Gangs are formed, they increase in boldness; the police are defied, and not a house is safe.

This place became a crying evil. The papers raved about it, the police (there were police now) complained and reported it to head-quarters. There was a universal clamour. By this time Stirmingham had got a corporation, aldermen, and mayor, who met in a gorgeous Guildhall, and were

all sharp men of business. Now the corporation began to move in this matter of "Baskette's Folly." Outside people gave them the credit of being good citizens, animated by patriotic motives, anxious for the honour of their town, and desirous of repressing crime. Keen thinkers knew better—the Corporation was not above a good stroke of business. However, what they did was this: After a great deal of talk and palaver, and passing resolutions, and consulting attorneys, and goodness knows what, one morning a deputation waited upon Sternhold Baskette, Esq., at his hotel (he always lived at an hotel), and laid before him a handsome proposition. It was to the effect that he should lease them the said "Folly," or incomplete embryo city, for a term of years, in consideration whereof they would pay down a certain sum, and contract to erect buildings according to plans and specifications agreed upon, the whole to revert

in seventy years to Sternhold or his heirs.

Sternhold fought hard—he asked for extravagant terms, and had to be brought to reason by a threat of an appeal by the Corporation to Parliament for a private Act.

This sobered him, for he was never quite happy in his secret mind about his title. Terms were agreed upon, the earnest money paid, and the masons began to work. Then suddenly there was an uproar. The companies or syndicates who had leased portions of the estate grew alarmed lest this enormous undertaking should, when finished, depreciate their property. They cast about for means of opposing it. It is said—but I cannot believe it—that they gave secret pay to the thieves and ruffians in the cellars to fight the masons and bricklayers, and drive them off.

At all events serious collisions occurred. But the Corporation was too strong. They

telegraphed to London and got reinforcements, and carried the entrenchments by storm.

Then, so goes the discreditable rumour, the companies bribed the masons and bricklayers, who built so badly that every now and then houses fell in, and there was a fine loss! Finally they got up an agitation, cried down the Corporation for wasting public funds, and, what was far more serious, brought high legal authority to prove that *as a Corporation* they had no power to pledge themselves to such terms as they had, or indeed to enter into such a contract without polling the whole city.

This alarmed the Corporation. There were secret meetings and long faces. But if one lawyer discovers a difficulty, another can always suggest a way round the corner. The Corporation went to Parliament, and got a private Act; but they did not go as a body. They went through Sternhold, who was persuaded; and indeed it looked

plausible, that by so doing, and by getting the sanction of the House of Commons, he improved his own title.

Then the Corporation smiled, and built away faster than ever. In the course of an almost incredibly short time the vast plans of Sternhold were completed by the various companies, by the Corporation, and by him-himself; for every penny he got as premium, every penny of ground-rent, every penny from his collieries, iron-furnaces, and cut-nail factories, went in bricks and mortar. It was the most magnificent scheme, perhaps, ever started by a single man. The city was proud of it. Like Augustus, he had found it brick, and left it marble.

Yet, in reality, he was no richer. The largest owner, probably, of house property in the world, he could but just pay his way at his hotel. Although he had a fine country house (which old Romy had purchased) in the suburbs, he never used it—it was let. He preferred a hotel as a

single man because there was no trouble to look after servants, &c. He lived in the most economical manner—being obliged to, in fact.

Yet this very economy increased the popular belief in his riches. He was a miser. Give a man that name, let it once stick to him, and there is no limit to the fables that will be eagerly received as truth. Give a dog a bad name and hang him. Call a man a miser, and, if he is so inclined, he can roll in borrowed money, dine every day on presents of game and fish, and marry any one he chooses. I only wish I had the reputation.

No one listened to Sternhold's constant reiteration of what was true—that he was really poor. It was looked upon as the usual stock-in-trade language of a miser. His fame spread. Popular rumour magnified and magnified the tale till it became like a chapter from the Arabian Nights.

After all, there was some grain of truth

in it. If he could have grasped all that was his, he would have surpassed all that was said about his riches.

At last the *Stirmingham Daily News* hit upon a good idea to out-distance its great rival the *Stirmingham Daily Post.* This idea was a "Life of Sternhold Baskette, the Miser of Stirmingham." After the editor had considered a little, he struck out "miser," and wrote "capitalist"—it had a bigger sound.

The manuscript was carefully got up in secret by the able editor and two of his staff, who watched Sternhold like detectives, and noted all his peculiarities of physiognomy and manner. They knew—these able editors know everything—that the public are particularly curious how much salt and pepper their heroes use, what colour neck-tie they wear, and so on. As the editor said, they wanted to make Sternhold the one grand central figure—perfect, complete in every detail. And they did it.

They traced his origin and pedigree—this last was not quite accurate, but near enough. They devoted 150 pages to a mere catalogue of his houses, his streets, his squares, club-houses, theatres, hotels, railways, collieries, ironworks, nail factories, estates, country mansions, &c. They wrote 200 pages of speculations as to the actual value of this enormous property; and modestly put the total figure at "something under twenty millions, and will be worth half as much again in ten years." They did not forget the building leases; when these fell in, said the memoir, he or his heirs would have an income of 750,000*l.* per annum.

They carefully chronicled the fact that the capitalist had never married, that he had no son or daughter, that he was growing old, or, at least, past middle age, and had never been known to recognise any one as his relation (having, in fact, shipped the whole family to America). What a glorious

thing this would be for some lucky fellow! They finished up with a photograph of Sternhold himself. This was difficult to obtain. He was a morose, retiring man—he had never, so far as was known, had his portrait taken. It was quite certain that no persuasion would induce him to sit for it. The able editor, however, was not to be done. On some pretext or other Sternhold was got to the office of the paper, and while he sat conversing with the editor, the photographer "took him" through a hole made for the purpose in the wooden partition between the editor's and sub-editor's room. As Sternhold was quite unconscious, the portrait was really a very good one. Suddenly the world was taken by storm with a "Life of Sternhold Baskette, the Capitalist of Stirmingham. His enormous riches, pedigree, &c., 500 pages, post 8vo, illustrated, price 7*s.* 6*d.*"

The able editor did not confine himself to Stirmingham. Before the book was announced he made his London arrangements, also with

the lessees of the railway bookstalls. At one and the same moment of time, one morning Stirmingham woke up to find itself placarded with huge yellow bills (the *News* was Liberal then—it turned its coat later on—and boasted that John Bright had been to the office), boys ran about distributing handbills at every door, men stood at the street corners handing them to everybody who passed.

Flaring posters were stuck up at every railway station in the kingdom; ditto in London. The dead walls and hoardings were covered with yellow paper printed in letters a foot long. Three hundred agents, boys, girls, and men, walked all over the metropolis crying incessantly "Twenty Millions of Money," and handing bills and cards to every one. The *Athenæum*, *Saturday Review*, *Spectator*, and *Times*; every paper, magazine, review; every large paper in the country had an advertisement. The result was something extraordinary.

The name of Sternhold Baskette was on

everybody's lips. His "Twenty Millions of Money" echoed from mouth to mouth, from Land's End to John o' Groats. It crossed the Channel, it crossed the Alps, it crossed the Atlantic and the Pacific. It was heard on the Peak of Teneriffe, and in the cities of India.

The New York firms seized on it as a mine of wealth. The book, reprinted, was sold from the Hudson River to the Rocky Mountains, and to the mouth of the Mississippi for twenty cents. The circulation was even larger in the United States than in Britain, for there everybody worshipped the dollar. The able editor made his fortune. The book ran through thirty editions, and wore out two printing machines and three sets of type. The two gentlemen of the staff who had assisted in the compilation had a fair share, and speedily put on airs. They claimed the authorship, though the idea had certainly originated with the editor. There was a quarrel. They left,

being offered higher salaries in this way:—The other paper, the *Post*, though blue in principles, grew green with envy, and tried to disparage as much as possible. They offered these respectable gentlemen large incomes to cut the book to pieces that they themselves had written. No one could do it better—no one understood the weak points, and the humbug of the thing so well. The fellows went to work with a will. The upshot was a little warfare between the Sternholders and the anti-Sternholders. The *News* upheld Sternhold, stuck to everything it had stated, and added more. The *Post* disparaged him in every possible way. This newspaper war had its results, as we shall presently see. For the present these two noble principled young men, who first wrote a book for pay and then engaged to chop it into mincemeat for pay, may be left to search and search into the Baskette by-gone history for fresh foul matter to pour forth on the hero of Stirmingham.

CHAPTER V.

"THE Hero of Stirmingham;" so the *News* dubbed him; so it became the fashion, either in ridicule or in earnest, to call him. People came from all parts to see him. Every one who, on business or pleasure, came to the city, tried to lodge at the hotel where he lived, or at least called there on the chance of meeting the mortal representative of Twenty Millions Sterling. The hotel proprietor, who had previously lost money by him, and execrated his economy, now reaped a golden harvest, and found his business so large that he set about building a monster place at one side of the original premises, for he was afraid to pull it down lest the capitalist should leave.

Now a curious psychological change was wrought by all this in old Sternhold's character. Up till this period of his life he had been one of the most retiring and reserved of men, morose, self-absorbed, shrinking from observation. He now became devoured with an insatiable vanity. He could not shake off the habit of economy, the frugal manner of living, which he had so long practised; but his mind underwent a complete revolution.

It has often been observed that when a man makes one particular subject his study, in course of time that which was once clear grows obscure, and instead of acquiring extraordinary insight, he loses all method, and wanders.

Something of the kind was the case with Sternhold. All his life had been devoted to the one great object of owning a city, of being the largest proprietor of houses and streets in the world. His whole thought, energy, strength, patience—his

entire being—had been concentrated upon this end. In actual fact, it was not attained yet, for he was practically only the nominal owner; but the publication of this book acted in a singular manner upon his brain. He grew to believe that he really was all that the "Life" represented him to be—*i.e.*, the most extraordinary man the world had ever seen.

He attempted no state, he set up no carriage; he stuck to his old confined apartments at the hotel he had always frequented; but he lived in an ideal life of sovereign grandeur. He talked as though he were a monarch—an absolute autocrat—as if all the inhabitants of Stirmingham were his subjects; and boasted that he could turn two hundred thousand people out of doors by a single word.

In plain language, he lost his head; in still plainer language, he went harmlessly mad—not so mad that any one even hinted at such a thing. There was no lunacy in

his appearance or daily life; but the great chords of the mind were undoubtedly at this period of his existence quite deranged.

He really was getting rich now. The houses he had himself completed, with the premiums paid for building leases, began to return a considerable profit. The income from his collieries and factories was so large, that even bricks and mortar could not altogether absorb it. Perhaps he was in receipt of three thousand pounds per annum, or more. But now, unfortunately, just as the fruits of his labour were fast ripening, this abominable book upset it all.

There can be no doubt that the editor of the *Stirmingham Daily News*, with the best intentions in the world, dealt his Hero two mortal wounds. In the first place, he drove him mad. Sternhold spent days and nights studying how he could exceed what he had already done.

Dressed in a workman's garb for dis-

guise, he explored the whole neighbourhood of Stirmingham, seeking fresh land to purchase. His object was to get it cheap, for he knew that if there was the slightest suspicion that he was after it, a high price would be asked. In some instances he succeeded. One or two cases are known where he bought, with singular judgment and remarkable shrewdness, large tracts for very small sums. He paid only one-fifth on completion, leaving the remainder on mortgage. This enabled him to buy five times as much at once as would have otherwise been possible.

But there were sharp fellows in Stirmingham, who watched the capitalist like hawks, and soon spied out what was going on. Their game was to first discover in what direction Sternhold was buying in secret, then to forestall him, and nearly double the price when he arrived.

In this way Sternhold got rid of every shilling of his income. Even then he might

have prospered; but, as bad luck would have it, the railway, after two millions of money had been sunk on it, actually began to pay dividends of three and a half per cent., then four, then six; for a clever fellow had got at the helm, and was forcing up the market so as to make hay while the sun shone.

Sternhold was in raptures with railways. Some sharp young men of forty-five and fifty immediately laid their heads together, and projected a second railway at almost right angles—not such a bad idea, but one likely to cause enormous outlay. They represented to Sternhold that this new line would treble the value of the property he had recently bought, extending for some miles beyond the city. He jumped at it. The Bill was got through Parliament. One half of these sharp young men were lawyers, the other half engineers and contractors.

Sternhold deposited the money, and they shared it between them. When the money was exhausted the railway languished. This

exasperated old Baskette. For the first time in his life he borrowed money, and did it on a royal scale;—I am almost afraid to say how much, and certainly it seems odd how people could advance so much knowing his circumstances.

However, he got it. He bought up all the shares, and became practically owner of the new line. He completed it, and rode on the first locomotive in triumph, surrounded by his parasites. For alas! he had yielded to parasites at last, who flattered and fooled him to perfection. This was the state of affairs when the second mortal wound was given.

It happened in this way. The "Life of Sternhold Baskette, Esq.," had, as was stated, got abroad, and penetrated even to the Rocky Mountains. It was quoted, and long extracts made from it in the cheap press—they had a cheap press in the United States thirty years before we had, which accounts for the larger proportion of educated or

partly educated people, and the wider spread of intelligence. After a while, somehow or other, the marvellous story reached the ears of one or two persons who happened to sign their names Baskette, and they began to say to themselves, "What the deuce is this? We rather guess we come from Stirmingham or somewhere thereabouts. Now, why shouldn't we share in this mine of wealth?"

The sharp Yankee intellect began to have "idees." Most of the cotters whom Sternhold had transhipped to America thirty years or more previous, were dead and buried —that is to say, the old people were.

The air of America is too thin and fine, and the life too fast, for middle-aged men who have been accustomed to the foggy atmosphere and the slow passage of events in the Old Country. But it is a tremendous place for increase of population.

The United States are only just a century old, and they have a population larger than

Great Britain, which has a history of twenty centuries, or nearly so.

So it happened that, although the old people were dead, the tribe had marvellously increased. Half who were transhipped had borne the name of Baskette. This same question was asked in forty or fifty places at once—"My name is Baskette; why should not I share?"

These people had, of course, little or no recollection of the deed signed by their forefathers: and if they had had a perfect knowledge, such a trifling difficulty as that was not one calculated to appal a Yankee's ingenuity. When once the question had been asked it was repeated, and grew and grew, and passed from man to man, made its appearance in the newspapers, who even went so far as to say that the finest city in England, the very workshop of the Britishers, belonged to United States citizens.

Some editor keener than the rest, or who had read the book more carefully, pointed

out that the capitalist had no heirs living, that he had never been married, and no one knew to whom all this vast wealth would descend.

Twenty millions sterling begging a heir! This was enough to set the American mind aflame. It was just like applying a lighted match to one of their petroleum wells.

The paragraph flew from paper to paper, was quoted, conned, and talked over. Men grew excited. Presently, here and there one who considered that he had some claim began to steal off to England to make inquiries. The Cunard were running now, though they had not yet invented the "ocean highway," by keeping to a course nothing to the north or south of a certain line. Passage was very quick, and not dear. In a little time the fact that one or two had started oozed out, then others followed, and were joined by a lawyer or so, till at last fourteen or fifteen keen fellows reached Stirmingham.

Now mark the acuteness of the American mind! Instead of announcing their arrival, every one of these fellows kept quiet, and said not a word! When they met each other in the streets they only smiled. They were not going to alarm the game.

These gentlemen were not long in Stirmingham before they found out that the *Stirmingham Daily Post* was a deadly enemy of old Sternhold. To the office of the second able editor they tramped accordingly. There they learnt a good deal; but in return the editor pumped something out of them, and, being well up in the matter, sniffed out their objects. He chuckled and rubbed his hands together. Here was a chance for an awful smash at the *News*.

One fine morning out came a leading article referring also to several columns of other matter on the same subject, headed "The Heirs of Stirmingham."

Being Blue, you see, the *Post* affected to abominate United States' Republicanism

and all the American institutions. This article recounted the visit of the dozen or so of possible claimants, described them so minutely that no one could help recognising them, and wound up with a tremendous peroration calling upon all good citizens to do their best to prevent the renowned city of Stirmingham falling into the hands of the Yankees!

Such property as Sternhold's, the article argued, was of national importance; and although the individual should not be interfered with, the nation should see that its rights were not tampered with. There was danger of such tampering, for who knew what an *infirm old* man like Sternhold might not be led to sign by interested parties? At his age he could not be expected to possess the decision and mental firmness of earlier years. This was a cruel hit at Sternhold's mental weakness, which had begun to grow apparent.

An endeavour should be made to find an

English heir, and that there was such an heir they (the staff of the *Post*) firmly believed. Two gentlemen of the staff (meaning thereby the late writers for the *News*), who had devoted some time to the matter, had made a certain important discovery. This was nothing less than the fact that Sternhold had had an uncle! This in big capital letters.

AN UNCLE. Then followed a little bit of genealogy, in approved fashion, with dashes, lines, &c.—the meaning of which was that Sternhold's father, old Romy Baskette, had had a brother, who, when the original Will Baskette was shot, had departed into the unknown with his mother.

What had become of Romy's brother? The probability was that by this time he was dead and buried. But there was also the probability that he had married and had children. Those children, if they existed, were undoubtedly the nearest heirs

of Sternhold Baskette, Esq., now residing at Dodd's Hotel, South Street. As an earnest of the anxiety of the *Post* to preserve the good city of Stirmingham from Yankee contamination, they now offered three rewards:—First, fifty pounds for proof of Romy's brother's death; secondly, one hundred pounds for proof of Romy's brother's marriage, if he had married; thirdly, one hundred and fifty pounds for the identification of his child or children. This was repeated as an advertisement in the outer sheet, and was kept in type for months.

It deserves notice as being the first advertisement which appeared in the Great Baskette Claim Case—the first of a crop of advertisements which in time became a regular source of income to newspaper proprietors.

When this leading article and advertisement, supported by several columns of descriptive matter and genealogies was laid

on the breakfast tables of half Stirmingham, it caused a sensation. The city suddenly woke up to the fact that as soon as old Sternhold died half the place would have no owner.

The Yankee visitors now had no further reason for concealment. They went about openly making inquiries. They were fêted at hotel bars and in billiard rooms. They called upon Sternhold bodily—*en masse*—forced themselves into his apartment, though he shut the door with his own hands in their faces, shook him by the hand, patted him on the shoulder, called him "Colonel," and asked him what he would take to drink!

They walked round him, admired him from every point of view, stuck their fingers in his ribs, and really meant no harm, though their manners were not quite of the drawing-room order.

They cut up the old man's favourite arm-chair, whittled it up, to carry away as

souvenirs. They appropriated his books—his own particular penholder, with which he had written every letter and signed every deed for fifty years, disappeared, and was afterwards advertised as on show at Barnum's in New York City, as the Pen which could sign a cheque for Twenty Millions!

When at last they did leave, one popped back, and asked if the "Colonel" believed this story about his *Uncle?* He was sure he had never had an uncle, wasn't he? The old man sat silent, which the inquirer took for once as a negative, and wrote a letter to the *News,* denying the existence of Romy's brother.

Poor old Sternhold was found by the landlord, old Dodd, sitting in his chair, which was all cut and slashed, two hours afterwards, staring straight at the wall.

Dodd feared he had an attack of paralysis, and ran for the nearest doctor; but it was nothing but literally speechless indignation. After awhile he got up and walked about

the room, and took a little dry sherry—his favourite wine. But the mortal wound No. 2 had been given. Henceforth the one great question in Sternhold's mind was his heir.

CHAPTER VI.

HIS heir! Sternhold seriously believed that he had no living relations. It is often said that poor people have plenty of children, while the rich, to whom they would be welcome, have few or none. This was certainly a case in point. The poor Baskettes, who had been shipped to America, had a whole tribe of descendants. Here was a man who, nominally at least, was the largest owner of property known, who was childless, and had already reached and exceeded the allotted age of man.

Sternhold was seventy-two. He looked back and ransacked his memory. He had never heard anything of this uncle, his father's brother; his mother's friends were all dead. There was not a soul for whom he cared a

snap of his fingers. Firstly, he had no relations; secondly, he had no friends, for Sternhold, wide as was his circle of acquaintances, had never been known to visit any one. His life had been solitary and self-absorbed.

Now, for the first time, he felt his loneliness, and understood that he was a solitary being. Who should be his heir? Who should succeed to that mighty edifice he had slowly built up? The architect had been obliged to be content with gazing upon the outside of his work only; but the successor, if he only lived the usual time, would revel in realised magnificence unsurpassed. The old man was quite staggered, and went about as in a dream.

The idea once started, there were plenty who improved upon it. The Corporation at their meetings incidentally alluded to the matter, and it was delicately suggested that Sternhold would crown his memory with ineffable glory if he devised his vast

estate to the city. Such a bequest in a few years would make the place absolutely free from taxation. The rents would meet poor's-rates, gas-rates, water-rates, sanitary-rates, and all. One gentleman read an elaborate series of statistics, proving that the income from the property, when once the building leases fell in, would not only free the city from local, but almost, if not quite, from imperial taxation. There were many instances in history of kings, as rewards for great services, issuing an order that certain towns should be exempt from the payment of taxes for a series of years. Sternhold had it thus in his power to display really regal munificence.

Other gentlemen of more radical leanings cried "Shame!" on the mere fact of one man being permitted to attain such powers. It was absurd for one man to possess such gigantic wealth, and for several hundred thousand to live from hand to mouth. The people should share it, not as a gift,

but as a right; it should be seized for the benefit of the community.

The Corporation people were much too knowing to talk like this. They went to work in a clever way. First, they contrived various great banquets, to which Sternhold was invited, and at which he was put in the seat of honour and lauded to the skies. Next, they formed a committee and erected a statue in a prominent place to the founder of Stirmingham, and unveiled it with immense ceremony. Certain funds had been previously set apart for the building of a public library; this being completed about that time, was named the Sternhold Institute. An open space or "park," which the Corporation had been obliged to provide for the seething multitudes who were so closely crowded together, was called the Sternhold Public Park. Yet Sternhold never subscribed a farthing to either of these.

Nothing was left undone to turn his head. His portrait, life-size, painted in oil,

was hung up in the Council-hall; medals were struck to commemorate his birthday. The Corporation were not alone in their endeavours; other disinterested parties were hard at work. Most energetic of all were the religious people. Chapel projectors, preachers, church extension societies, missionary associations, flew at his throat. His letter-box was flooded; his door was for ever resounding with knocking and ringing. The sound of the true clerical nasal twang was never silent in his anteroom. The hospitals came down on him flat in one lump, more particularly those establishments which publicly boast that they never solicit assistance, and are supported by voluntary contributions caused by prayer.

The dodge is to publish the *fact* as loudly as possible. To proclaim that the institution urgently wants a few thousands is not begging. A list of all the charities that recommended themselves to his notice would

fill three chapters: then the patentees—the literary people who were prepared to write memoirs, biographies, &c.—would have to be omitted.

Now here is a singular paradox. If a poor wretched mortal, barely clothed in rags, his shoes off his feet, starving with hunger, houseless, homeless, who hath not where to lay his head, asks you for a copper, it means seven days' imprisonment as a rogue. If all the clergymen and ministers, the secretaries, and so forth, come in crowds begging for hundreds and thousands, it is meritorious, and is applauded.

Now this is worthy of study as a phenomenon of society. But these were not all. Sternhold had another class of applicants, whom we will not call ladies, or even women, but *females* (what a hateful word female is), who approached him pretty much as the Shah was approached by every post while in London and Paris.

He was deluged with photographs of—

females. Not disreputable characters either —not of Drury Lane or Haymarket distinction, but of that class who use the columns of the newspapers to advertise their matrimonial propensities. Tall, short, dark, light, stout, thin, they poured in upon him by hundreds; all ready, willing, and waiting.

Most were "thoroughly domesticated and musical;" some were penetrated with the serious responsibilities of the position of a wife; others were filled with hopes of the life to come (having failed in this).

Some men would have enjoyed all this; some would have smiled; others would have flung the lot into the waste-basket. Sternhold was too methodical and too much imbued with business habits to take anything as a good joke. He read every letter, looked at every photograph, numbered and docketed them, and carefully put them away.

Other efforts were made to get at him.

He had parasites—men who hung on him —lickspittles. To a certain extent he yielded to the titillation of incessant laudation; and, if he did not encourage, did not repel them. They never ceased to fan his now predominant vanity. They argued that the Corporation and all the rest were influenced by selfish motives (which was true). They begged him not to forget what was due to himself—not to annihilate and obliterate himself. It was true he was aged; but aged men—especially men who had led temperate lives like himself—frequently had children. In plain words, they one and all persuaded him to marry; and they one and all had a petticoated friend who would just suit him.

Sternhold seemed very impassive and immoveable; but the fact was that all this had stirred him deeply. He began to seriously contemplate marriage. He brooded over the idea. He was not a sentimental man; he had not even a spark of what is

called human nature in the sense of desiring to see merry children playing around him. But he looked upon himself as a mighty monarch; and as a mighty monarch he wished more and more every day to found not only a kingdom, but a dynasty.

This appears to be a weakness from which even the greatest of men are not exempt. Napoleon the Great could not resist the idea. It is the one sole object of almost all such men whose history is recorded. Occasionally they succeed; more often it destroys them. Some say Cromwell had hopes in that direction.

So far the parasites, the photographs, the stir that was made about it, affected Sternhold. But if he was mad, he was mad in his own way. He was not to be led by the nose; but those who knew him best could see that he was meditating action.

Dodd, the landlord of the hotel, was constantly bothered and worried for his opinion on the subject. At last, said Dodd,

"I think the Corporation have wasted their money." And they had.

In this unromantic country the human form divine has not that opportunity to display itself which was graciously afforded to the youth of both sexes in the classic days of Greece, when the virgins of Sparta, their lovely limbs anointed with oil, wrestled nude in the arena.

The nearest approach to those "good old times" which our modern prudery admits, is the short skirts and the "tights" of the ballet.

Sternhold, deeply pondering, arrived at the notion, true or false, that the wife for him must possess physical development.

This is a delicate subject to dwell on; but I think he was mistaken when he visited the theatres seeking such a person. He might have found ladies, not *females* nor women, but ladies in a rank of life nearer or above his own, who exulted in the beauty of their form, and were endowed with Nature's

richest gifts of shape. But he was a child in such a search: his ideas were rude and primitive to the last degree. At all events, the fact remains.

It was found out afterwards that he had visited every theatre in London, but finally was suited on the boards of a fourth-rate "gaff" in Stirmingham itself.

There was a girl there—or rather a woman, for she was all five-and-twenty—who was certainly as fine a specimen of *female* humanity as ever walked. Tall, but not too tall, she presented a splendid development of bust, torso, and limbs. Her skin was of that peculiar dusky hue—not dark, but dusky—which gives the idea of intense vitality. Her eyes were as coals of fire—large, black, deep-set, under heavy eyebrows. Her hair at a distance was superb—like night in hue, and glossy, curling in rich masses. Examined closer it was coarse, like wire. Her nose was the worse feature; it wanted shape, definition. It was a decided

retroussé, and *thick*; but in the flush of her brilliant colour, her really grand carriage, this was passed over. Her lips were scarlet, and pouted with a tempting impudence.

This was the very woman Sternhold sought. She was vitality itself impersonified. He saw her, offered his hand, and was instantly accepted. He wished her to keep it quiet; and notwithstanding her feminine triumph she managed to do so, and not a soul in Stirmingham guessed what was in the wind.

Sternhold went to London, got a special license, and the pair were married in Sternhold's private apartments at his hotel in the presence of three people only, one of whom was the astounded Dodd. They left by the next train for London, where the bride went to Regent Street to choose her trousseau, with her husband at her side.

Not a bell was rung in Stirmingham. The news spread like wildfire, and con-

founded the city. People gathered at the corners of the streets.

"He is certainly mad," they said. Most of them were in some way disappointed.

"He may be," said a keener one than the rest; "he may be—but *she* is not."

CHAPTER VII.

LUCIA MARESE, now Mrs. Sternhold Baskette, was the daughter of an Italian father and an English mother, and had a tolerably accurate acquaintance with Leicester Square and Soho. She was not an absolutely bad woman in the coarsest sense of the term—at least not at that time, she had far too much ambition to destroy her chance so early in life. Physiologists may here discuss the question as to whether any latent trace of the old gipsy blood of the Baskettes had in any way influenced Sternhold in his choice. Ambitious as she was, and possessed of that species of beauty which always takes with the multitude, Lucia had hitherto been a failure. Just as in literature and in art, the greatest

genius has to wait till opportunity offers, and often eats its own heart in the misery of waiting, so she had striven and fought to get to the front, and yet was still a stroller when Sternhold saw her. She knew that if only once she could have made her appearance on the London boards, with her gorgeous beauty fully displayed, and assisted by dress and music, that she should certainly triumph. But she could not get there.

Other girls less favoured by Nature, but more by circumstance, and by the fickle and unaccountable tastes of certain wealthy individuals, had forestalled her, and she stored up in her mind bitter hatred of several of these who had snubbed and sneered at her.

The fairy prince of her dream, however, came at last in the person of an old man of three score years and ten, and she snapped him up in a trice. No doubt, like all Stirmingham, she entertained the most fabulous ideas of Sternhold's wealth.

These dreams were destined to be rudely

shattered. She seems to have had pretty much her own way at first. Doubtless the old man was as wax in her hands, till his former habits began to pull at him. She had one good trait at all events, if it could be called good—the first use she made of her new position was to provide for her family, or rather for the only member of it in England.

This was Aurelian Marese, her brother, who must have been a man of some talent and energy, for despite all obstacles of poverty he contrived to pass his examination and obtain a diploma from the College of Surgeons. He came to Stirmingham, and with the assistance of Sternhold's purse set up as a mad doctor, in plain parlance, or in softer language, established a private lunatic asylum. Oddly enough, it would seem that notwithstanding the immense population of the city, there was not till that time any establishment of the kind in the place, and the result was that Aurelian prospered. He certainly was a clever fellow,

as will be presently seen, though some fancy he over-reached himself. When at last Sternhold, worn out with the unwonted gaieties into which Lucia plunged him, showed unmistakable signs of weariness, and desired to return to Stirmingham, she yielded with a good grace. She reckoned that he could not last long, and it was her game to keep him in good temper; for she had learnt by this time that he had the power to dispose of his property just as he chose.

We can easily imagine the restlessness of this creature confined in the dull atmosphere of three or four rooms at Dodd's Hotel, South Street. But she bore it, and to her it was a species of martyrdom—the very reverse of what she had pictured.

After awhile, as time went on, whispers began to fly about—people elevated their eyebrows and asked questions under their breath, exchanged nods and winks. The fact was apparent; Sternhold could scarce contain himself for joy. There was an un-

doubted prospect of The Heir. The old man got madder than ever—that is, in the sense of self-laudation. He could not admire himself sufficiently. The artful woman played upon him, you may be sure; at all events there was a deed of gift executed at this time conveying to her certain valuable estates lying outside the city, and tolerably unencumbered. Why she came to select those particular estates which were not half so valuable as others she might have had, was known only to herself then; but doubtless Aurelian had heard about the Yankee claims, and advised her to take what was safe. These estates were, in fact, bought with old Romy's money made by the nail factory, and were quite apart from the rest.

About this time, also, Sternhold left Dodd's Hotel. This was another evidence of her power over him. The best joke was, that although there was old Romy's country mansion about five miles from Stirming-

ham, although Sternhold had since purchased four other mansions, and had nominally street upon street of houses in the town, he had not a place to take his wife to. He was obliged to rent one of his own houses of the company who had built it on a building lease.

Mrs. Sternhold now had her great wish gratified to some extent. She was the observed of all observers. They tell you tales now in Stirmingham of her extravagance, and the lengths she went. Her carriages, her horses, her servants, her dinners, parties, and what not, were the one topic of conversation. Even old-fashioned, straitlaced people found their objections overcome by curiosity, and accepted her invitations.

Old Sternhold was never visible at these gatherings; but he rejoiced in them. He was proud of his wife. He looked upon her as a prodigy. He gave her the reins. But personally he practically returned to

his old habits. He still retained his old apartments at Dodd's; and there he might be found, at almost all hours, sitting at his desk, and eagerly, joyously receiving every visitor who came to tell him of some fresh extravagance, some fresh frolic of his wife's!

How was all this expenditure supported, since his actual income was so small? By a series of loans, which there were always men ready to offer, and whose terms Sternhold always signed. Once or twice he did remonstrate, but darling Lucia went into tears, and her brother Aurelian assured him that, in her state of health, any vexation was dangerous, &c. Aurelian, through the Sternhold connexion, was now a fashionable physician.

At last the event happened, and a son was born. The memory of the week succeeding that day will not soon pass away in Stirmingham.

Old Sternhold, himself a most temperate man, declared that he would make every

one in the city tipsy; and he practically succeeded. He had barrels of ale and gallons of spirits and wine offered free to all comers at every public-house and tavern. He had booths erected in an open field just outside the town, for dancing and other amusements, and here refreshments of all kinds were served out gratis.

The police were in despair. The cells overflowed, and would hold no more, and the streets reeled with drunken men, and still more drunken women.

This saturnalia reigned for four days, and would soon have culminated—at least, so the police declared—in a general sack of the city by the congregated ruffians. A detachment of dragoons was actually sent for, and encamped in St. George's Square, with their horses and arms ready at a moment's notice. But it all passed off quietly; and from that hour Sternhold, and more particularly the infant son, became the idol of the populace.

They still look back with regret to those four days of unlimited licence, and swear by the son of Sternhold.

This boy was named John Marese Baskette, but was always called Marese. Singularly enough, the birth of this child, which one would have prophesied would have completed the hold Lucia had over the father, was the beginning of the difficulties between them. It began in his very nursery. Proud of her handsome figure, and still looking forward to popular triumphs, Lucia flatly refused to nurse the infant herself.

This caused a terrible quarrel. Old Sternhold had old-fashioned ideas. But there is no need to linger on this. Lucia, of course, had her own way, and Sternhold retired to sulk at Dodd's Hotel. From that time the chink widened, and the mutual distrust strengthened.

There never was any real doubt that the boy was legitimate; but some devil whis-

pered the question in Sternhold's mind, and he brooded over it. I say some devil, but, in actual fact, it was one of those parasites who have been once or twice alluded to. Is there anything that class will stop at in the hope of a few formal lines in a rich man's will?

It was their game to destroy Lucia. The plan was cunningly formed. As if by accident, passages in Lucia's previous life, when she was a stroller, were alluded to in Sternhold's presence.

He grew excited, and eager to hear more; to probe her supposed dishonour. The parasites distinctly refused; it was too serious a matter. Still, if he wished to hear—it was common talk—all he had to do was to go into the billiard-rooms. Some of the fellows there did not know him by sight, and they were sure to talk about it.

Sternhold went. Of all the sights in the world, to see that old man making a miserable attempt to play billiards while

his ears were acutely listening to the infamous tales purposely started to inflame him, nothing could be more deplorable. The upshot was he grew downright mad, but not so mad that anything could be done with him. He watched over Lucia like a hawk. She could not move; her life became really burdensome.

It must be remembered that at that time she really was, though wild enough in blood, perfectly stainless in fact. The temper in the woman was long restrained. In the first place, she wanted his money; in the next place, there was her son, whom she loved with all the vigour of her nature. She bore it for a year or two, then the devil in her began to stir.

Old Sternhold, who had watched and inquired hour by hour all this time, had found nothing wrong; but this very fact was turned against her by those devils, his lickspittles. They represented that this was part of her cunning—that she had

determined he should have no hold upon her, in order that her son might inherit. They reminded Sternhold that, although he could not divorce her, he could alter his will. Here they rather overshot the mark, because he began to reflect that if he cut off his son the old question would arise—To whom should he leave his city, as he called it?

The miserable dilemma haunted and worried his already weakened brain and body till he grew a shadow, and Lucia had hopes that he would die. But he did not; in a month or two the natural strength of his constitution brought him round.

All this time Lucia was in dread about his will. Aurelian astute and cunning as he was hardly knew what to advise or how to act. He had his spies—for he was wealthy now to a certain degree, and could afford it. He had his strong suspicions that some of the companies who had leased the property for building had a hand in the persecution of Lucia, and in the in-

flammation of Sternhold's jealousy. It was certainly their interest to get the boy disinherited. Aurelian began to grow seriously alarmed. Sternhold was stronger and better—perhaps if he had had Aurelian for physician he would not have recovered so fast; but with his distrust of Lucia came an equal distrust of her brother, and he would not acknowledge him.

Aurelian looked at it like this: Sternhold was now about seventy-five, and had no organic disease. His father, Romy, had lived to a ripe old age; his grandfather, the basket-maker, though shot in the prime of life, came of a hardy, half-gipsy stock. The chances were that Sternhold, with all the comforts that money could buy, would live another ten years. This very worry, this jealousy, by keeping his mental faculties alive, might contribute to longevity. In ten years, in a year, in a month, what might not happen?

His greatest fear was in Lucia herself,

who had shown signs of late that she must burst forth. If she did, and without his being near her, there was no knowing what indiscretion she might not commit. It was even suspicious that Sternhold had recovered. It looked as if he had made up his mind, and had signed a will averse to Lucia's interest and his son's—had settled it and dismissed it. This was a terrible thought, this last. When he suggested the possibility of it to Lucia, you should have seen her. She raved; her features swelled up and grew inflamed; her frame dilated; her blood seemed as if it would burst the veins: till at last she hissed out, "I'll kill him!" and fell fainting.

Aurelian determined one point at once. There must be no more delay; action was the order. But what? Suppose the worst. Suppose the will already made, and against Lucia's interests, what was the course to be taken? Why, to accumulate evidence to invalidate it. *Prove him mad!*

CHAPTER VIII.

THE idea having been once entertained, grew and grew, till it overshadowed everything else. The singular circumstance then happened of one man slowly and carefully collecting evidence during another's lifetime to prove him insane the moment he died.

Aurelian placed his principal reliance upon the violent jealousy Sternhold had exhibited. So vehement and irregulated a passion founded upon mere phantasms of the imagination, was in itself strong presumptive proof of an unsound mind. He had no difficulty in finding witnesses to Sternhold's outrageous conduct. The old man had been seen walking up and down the street, on the opposite side of the pave-

ment to the house in which Lucia lived, for hours and hours at a time, simply watching. He had been heard to use violent and threatening language. He had made himself ill. The mind was so overwrought by excitement that it reacted upon the body, and it was some time before the balance was restored—if indeed it could ever be restored.

There were many trifling little things of manner—of fidgetiness—absurd personal habits—which, taken in conjunction with the bad temper he had displayed, went to make up the case. Aurelian added to this the vanity Sternhold had of late openly indulged in. This was notorious, and had become a byword.

But when Aurelian had written all this out upon paper—when he had, as it were, prepared his brief—his shrewd sense told him that in truth it was very weak evidence. Any lawyer employed for the defence could easily find arguments to upset the whole.

Day by day, as he thought it over, his reliance upon the insanity resource grew less and less—and yet he could not see what else there was to do. He racked his brain. The man, like others, was in fact fascinated by the enormous property at stake: he could not get it out of his mind. It haunted him day and night. He ransacked his memory, called up all his reading, all his observation, all that he had heard—every expedient and plan that had come under his notice for gaining an end.

For a time, however, it was in vain. It is often the case that when we seek an idea it flies from us, and will not be constrained, not even by weeks of the deeply-pondering state. Often the more we think upon a subject, the less we seem to see our way clear. And so it was with him.

Sometimes a little change of scene, even a little manual exercise, will stimulate the imagination. So it was with him.

He had an important and serious case to

attend—a rich patient underwent an operation at his hands, and the physician grew so absorbed with his delicate manipulation and in genuine delight in his own skill, that Lucia and the property passed for a day or two completely out of his memory. This was followed by profound slumber, and next morning he awoke with the answer to the great question staring him in the face.

If Sternhold was not mad enough now, why not drive him mad? If he was driven frantic and shut up in an asylum, Lucia's son would to a certainty inherit the property. Possibly he (Aurelian) might be appointed trustee—he, as uncle, would be a guardian, and probably the only one. He might also have the pleasure of receiving Sternhold into his own retreat for lunatics; and so, while furthering the interests of his sister and nephew, do himself a good turn. The idea enraptured him.

Aurelian possessed the true scientific mind which is incapable of feeling. Some thinkers

believe that the true artistic mind, the highest artistic mind, is also incapable of feeling. It is so absorbed in its own realisation of one idea, that it loses all consciousness of possible suffering in others. He never doubted for an instant that it was in his power to attain the proposed object—it was only to *let Lucia loose*. Let her loose—a little way. Let her loose under strict supervision—under the constant surveillance of himself, his son, a youth of twenty whom he was training up in the right road, and perhaps of other witnesses.

There was such a thing as divorce—this might not destroy the child's right, but it would place him out of Lucia's hands. There must be no handle for Lucia's enemies to grasp at. She must be manœuvred so as to make Sternhold frantic without committing herself.

Lucia was aflame for such a course. She had restrained herself for years. She was burning to be free, on fire for "life" and

excitement; above all, for admiration, for praise—the intoxicating breath of the multitude that cheers to the echo! The Stage! the dance—music—the fiery gaze of a thousand eyes following each motion! There must have been something of the true artist in her. The grandest position, the most unlimited wealth, would not have satisfied her without the stage.

She had married Sternhold in the hope of appearing as other women did in the theatres owned by their lovers. She had tried to broach the subject to Sternhold; he had held up his hands in horror, and she constrained herself and bided her time.

Nearly four years now—four years! The coarse jests, the loud laughter, the shouts and screams and cat-calls of the low threepenny gaff or music hall from which she had been snatched—even such a life as that seemed to her far, far superior to this irksome confinement, this slavery

which was not even gilded. Aurelian was right in his conjecture that she could not be much longer held in—she must burst out.

Half-formed schemes had been working themselves into shape in her mind for months past. She would leave her boy with Aurelian, take her jewels and sables, sell them, borrow money upon the estate which Sternhold had made hers by deed of gift, go to London or Paris, and plunge headlong into "life," paying any price for the one grand ambition of her existence.

The craving—the *fury*, it might almost be called—the furious desire for admiration from men which seized upon her at times, would certainly, sooner or later, have hurled her on to a desperate step.

At this moment Aurelian came with his carefully-considered plan. She met him open-armed. With one blow she could avenge herself upon Sternhold, with one blow gratify herself and destroy him—

destroy him body and soul. This moment —this hour!

But not so fast. First, Aurelian obtained the money—no small sum. Next, said he, this thing must not be done by halves. It was useless for her to appear on some small stage; she must at one bound become the talk of all the town. This required care, thought, and organisation. Those great successes that seemed so suddenly attained without an effort, as by a wave of the hand, had really been preceded by months and months of preparation, and depended in great part upon the matured judgment and clever advice of men who had watched the public for years.

Impatient as she was, Lucia again controlled herself, and did as she was bid. Aurelian made it his business first to discover where she could appear with most effect. He soon selected the place, Paris; he obtained an interview with the proper authorities, and confided to them a part of

his secret. They saw their way to profit, and agreed.

The next thing was the character she should take, and the second, the season. This last the manager, or rather owner, who was in raptures with the thing, easily decided. It must be at the height of the Paris season. He was a popular man, who could gather together a mighty crowd of his own acquaintances.

If poor Sternhold, sitting in his apartment at Dodd's Hotel, could have heard these "fast" young men discussing the approaching appearance of his wife, Aurelian would have gone no further.

The choice of character Aurelian insisted upon deciding, and he chose Lady Godiva. As has been stated, Lucia had extraordinary hair, both for length and abundance, and, unlike long hair generally, it was curly. Had it been fine and delicate hair she could have boasted that few women in Europe could equal her. The coarseness of its

texture would not be visible upon the stage.

She had really a magnificent figure. The character of Lady Godiva was one exactly fitted for her. It is needless to say that there was little or no acting—no study of parts, no insight into the meaning required, as in the case of Shakspeare's heroines. The piece was simply a spectacle devised to bring out one central figure into the boldest relief.

The greatest difficulty the conspirators—for so they may be fairly called—had to contend with was the necessity of keeping Sternhold completely in the dark, and yet at the same time getting together a large audience, which could only be done by advertising. But Aurelian was capable of dealing with more difficult dilemmas than this. His plan was very simple and yet effective. The manager had a piece in his *répertoire* which, owing to the fame or infamy of a certain fascinating lady, was the

rage of the town. Suddenly this creature disappeared—went off to Vienna with a titled gentleman—and after blazing as a meteor of the first water there for a short time, as suddenly dropped out of sight altogether.

The manager, at Aurelian's suggestion, gave out that this lady had turned up, and was going to again act at his house on a certain night.

The excitement was intense. It was an awful falsehood, for the poor girl was in reality dead. (She met with her death under some strange and suspicious circumstances, which were, by influence, suppressed.) Her beauty, great as it was, had lost its charm in the tomb; yet her name, in flaring letters, was prominent all over Paris.

The deception was kept up to the very end; and the company of the theatre, by dint of double pay, were got to carry it out to perfection. An exceptional number of

waiters were, however, hired, and no one but the manager and Aurelian had any idea what the object of this troop of apparently idle fellows could be.

The house filled to the last seat. The poor dead girl's name was on every lip—her frailties were discussed with horrid flippancy; the orchestra began, and Lucia Marese Baskette robed. or rather unrobed, as Lady Godiva.

The owner of the theatre was there, and with him a whole host of men about town, most of whom were partly in the secret, but not quite.

Just before the time arrived for the curtain to rise, this troop of idle waiters entered the arena, swarmed into the boxes, into the galleries and pit, distributing to every single individual who had entered a handbill, announcing that, instead of Miss ——, "Mrs. Sternhold Baskette, the beautiful wife of Sternhold Baskette, Esq., the richest man in the world, the owner of twenty millions

sterling worth of property, would appear as Lady Godiva; a part for which her splendid physique and magnificent hair peculiarly fitted her." At the same moment a large poster was put out in front of the curtain, bearing the same announcement.

The effect was singular. The house, which had been full of noise before, became as still as death. People were astounded. They could not believe it possible; yet, at the same time, they knew that the manager dared not play a trick. Theatres had been wrecked before now by indignant audiences. They waited in silence.

The curtain rose. I cannot pause to describe the gradual enthusiasm which arose, nor to draw a picture of the grand *tableau*. But there are many living who remember that memorable night, who declare that anything equal to it has never been seen upon the stage.

Lucia rode on a milk-white palfrey, and looked extraordinarily handsome. The house

rose—the audience went mad. Recalled and recalled, again and again that white palfrey paced to and fro, and the mighty multitude would not allow the scene to pass.

The mesmeric influence of the excitement filled Lucia with a glowing beauty; with a brilliance which made her seem a goddess—of her order. No one remarked whether the piece was properly gone through after this. I think it was not. From all that I can learn, I believe the audience watched Godiva to and fro till the palfrey or its rider grew exhausted, and then left *en masse*.

Paris was aflame next day. The papers said nothing—they were wise. There is, however, something more powerful even than the newspaper—it is conversation. Lucia had got conversation—her name was heard everywhere. It was not only the acting, or show—it could not be called acting—it was the fact of her position as Sternhold's wife. She stood upon the pinnacle of his fame for wealth, brazen and

shameless in the eyes of the world. Brazen and shameless, yet secure; for Aurelian never left her. He watched her himself. His son—his paid servants—did the same; not from fear of her indiscretion, but in order to appear as witnesses if any proceedings should take place.

Next night and next night, and again on the third night, this extraordinary spectacle was repeated. The crowds that came to the doors could not be admitted. But by this time the leading papers had felt the pulse of the people—not the excitable populace, but the steady *people*. With one consent they rushed at the exhibition with lance in rest. Improper was the softest insinuation. They were undoubtedly right. The moment they took this tone all the press followed, and before the week was over those who had the power had prohibited the performance.

CHAPTER IX.

THE exhibition was stopped, but the end had been attained—Lucia was famous. The manager and Aurelian had foreseen the inevitable official veto, and had prepared for it. They had arranged for her to appear as Cleopatra; it was a part which could be made to suit her admirably by leaving Shakspeare's text out of the question, and studying spectacle instead.

It is a singular fact that Sternhold had no idea of what was going on until the fourth or fifth day. He was told that Lucia had left Stirmingham with her brother for a short visit to Paris, and paid little or no attention to it. For the first day or two the papers had been silent. At last the news reached him.

What Dodd had previously feared now happened—he was struck down with a slight attack of paralysis, which affected one side. Some persons said it was a merciful infliction, as it prevented him from witnessing his wife's disgrace with his own eyes. They were wrong. His body was bent, but his mind was torn with contending and frenzied passions. The sense of outrage—of outrage upon his dignity—was perhaps the strongest. That after all his labour and self-denial, after long, long years of slowly building up a property such as his, which rendered him in his own estimation not one whit inferior to a king; that he should be insulted, his name dragged in the dirt, his wife a spectacle for all Paris!

Sternhold had the vaguest ideas of stage proprieties and theatrical morality. He had not a doubt but that Lucia was already an abandoned woman. There were plenty who urged upon him to commence a suit for

divorce, though in reality it was extremely doubtful whether there were sufficient grounds for anything beyond a judicial separation.

But Sternhold was filled with one consuming desire—to see her with his own eyes. Whether it was this passion, or whether it was the natural strength of his constitution, certain it is that in a marvellously short time after the attack, he had himself conveyed to Paris, and sat, a miserable, haggard, broken-down old man, in a box at the theatre the same night, watching his wife upon the stage. He did this night after night. A species of fascination seemed to carry him there to sit silent, brooding over the utter wreck of his great schemes.

After a while he went suddenly back to Stirmingham without a word, without so much as seeking an interview with Lucia, or issuing any instructions as to what was to be done. He went back to his old

apartments at Dodd's Hotel. He shut himself up, refusing to see even the wretched parasites who had sown the seed of this mischief. It was an instinctive attempt to return to the old, old habit, the ancient self-concentration, apart from the world. But it failed. So soon as ever he began to read his letters, to look into his accounts, every figure, every transaction reminded him of Lucia and her extravagance; the follies she had been guilty of, and the no less greater folly he had himself yielded to in granting her every wish, thereby involving his affairs in the most hopeless confusion. The attempt failed. He rushed again from his retreat to seek her. Then he heard that she was in Vienna performing. He got there, supported by his attendants. Doubtless the physical fatigue of the journey irritated his nerves; at all events, there seems no doubt that when he reached Vienna he was for the time absolutely mad.

He went to the theatre. He saw Lucia

as Godiva, just as she had been seen in Paris. He was alone in his box. Deliberately he levelled a pistol, resting the barrel upon the edge of the balustrade. As the incense of praise and adulation rose up, as the pageant moved to and fro, the deadly weapon was aimed at the central figure. He fired, and the house was in commotion.

Those who know what happens when a full theatre is alarmed and excited will require no description; those who have not seen it cannot imagine it.

A second report, and the curling smoke caused a rush to the box, and the occupant was found upon the floor, as was thought, dead. Lucia alone was calm and cool. The bullet had not passed even near her; the distance was great and the aim unsteady; the ball had struck a screen, and did no injury. She dismounted and advanced to the footlights, extended her hands, and in a few words begged the

audience to be calm. Speedily they saw her thus, as it were, in their very arms.

The theatre rang with acclamation. If it had been a scene prepared it could not have succeeded better.

There were threats and loud cries of rage against the man who had fired at her.

"Do not injure him," she said, at the top of her full, deep voice; "he is mad!" For she guessed in a moment who it was.

In a few minutes the whole thing was understood. Continental people are quick at comprehending—an old husband, a young wife—bah! An attempt first at murder, then at suicide—bah! What could he have done better calculated to put Lucia upon the pedestal of fame?

Sternhold was not dead; not even injured. The ball he had fired at himself had not touched him. He had fallen exhausted. When he became physically conscious, he was raving mad.

There was no doubt about it this time. It was a pitiable sight.

Aurelian insisted upon seeing him: even he shuddered. The old man was muttering gibberish to himself. Half his grey hair was gone, for before he could be stayed he had dragged it out. His arms and limbs were pinioned, but his body shook with a trembling convulsive movement. The deed was done.

Aurelian braced himself up, and hastened at once to Lucia. He knew he should have a struggle with her, and hoped that in the conflict he should forget the sight he had left. He had determined to at once withdraw her from the stage. The victory was won; there must be no more risk.

The conflict between the brother and sister was terrible. She raged, her frame swelled; she had tasted triumph, and the draught is more intoxicating even than the taste of blood. She would go on.

But he was resolute, and he won. That

very day he took her to England—took is the right word, for it was necessary to use physical force at times. He got her to her house at Stirmingham, and never left her till she had grown more composed.

Sternhold was in an asylum. Aurelian thought that he would surely die; but he did not.

Aurelian then began to scheme to get him in his own "retreat." Possession was nine points of the law. He went to Vienna at once before any one guessed his object, obtained the proper permit, and in six days deposited the wretched being in his asylum in the suburbs of Stirmingham. Once there, thought Aurelian, let them get him out if they can.

The fact was soon known; and there was an excitement. The parasites, disappointed and raging, did their best to inflame the populace. There was a growl, and the police began to prepare for an attack upon the asylum; but, after all, the moment any

of them reflected, they said, "Why, it's all right; the poor fellow is mad. He could not be in better hands." The plan of a popular tumult fell through.

The parasites next tried the law, but found that Aurelian had been before them: he had all the proper documents; he could not be touched.

Next the companies began to stir. They were uncertain what to do, and whether it was better for their interests that Sternhold should be in his brother-in-law's custody or not.

That astute gentleman very soon learnt what was passing in their minds, and he had a very good conception of what could be effected by powerful combination.

He opened negotiations with them. He pointed out to them privately that the real point at issue was not Sternhold, but the boy—the heir—for no one doubted the legitimacy. Who was to have the custody of the heir?

Clever Aurelian hoped that by making friends with the companies who held the building leases that there would be no opposition to his holding the boy—to his guardianship of the estate. He had strong grounds to go upon. To all intents and purposes he was the nearest relation. If the boy died, and no son of the phantom brother of Romy turned up, *perhaps* he might have a claim to the estate.

He gave the companies to understand that if he had the guardianship of the boy their interests should be most carefully studied.

They appeared favourable. The step was taken. The boy remained with his mother; his mother remained in her house, seeing Aurelian daily, and indeed watched by his *employés*.

No change took place. Aurelian congratulated himself that all was going on favourably. The boy, who had little or no idea of the meaning of the word "father,"

was constantly at Aurelian's residence—the asylum where his parent was confined—playing with Aurelian's son, who was carefully instructed to please him, and indeed was sharp enough already to require little instruction.

Sternhold lingered in his melancholy state. He was no longer violent—simply dejected. He did not seem able to answer the simplest question. If asked if he was hungry, he would stare, and say something relating to his school-days.

And this was the man who had built Stirmingham. For five years he remained in this state, and then suddenly brightened up; and it was thought and *feared* that he would recover the use of his faculties. It lasted but three days. In that short time he wrote three important documents.

The first was a statement to the effect that he had wronged Lucia. He now saw his folly—he had been led into his persecution of her by designing people, and blamed

himself for his subsequent conduct. He earnestly entreated her forgiveness. The second was a species of family history, short but complete, refuting the claims of the American Baskettes. They were indeed of the same name, he wrote, but not of the same blood. The truth was that the cotters who had lived in the Swamp, now covered with mansions, had no name. They were half gipsies; they had no registered or baptismal name.

Will Baskette, who had been shot, was the chief man among them, and gradually they came by the country people to be called by his name. They were not blood relations in any sense of the term. This paper also gave the writer's views of his transactions with the Sibbolds and the cotters or "Baskettes," and concluded with the firmly expressed conviction—the honest statement of a man near his end—that his title was irrefutable, and he knew of no genuine claim.

The third document was his Will. For now it appeared that hitherto he had never made a will at all. It was extremely short, but terse and unmistakable. It left the whole of his property, real and personal (with the single exception of the gift to Lucia), to his son, John Marese Baskette.

The will Aurelian took care was properly attested, and by independent witnesses whom he sent for.

On the fourth day old Sternhold died, quietly and without a word. He was buried, and hardly was he in the tomb before the battle began. The companies at once cut off all connection with Aurelian. They had reckoned upon his managing to get their terms at all events extended, as he had promised. The Corporation refused any honours to the dead king, and all eagerly sought about for the means of dividing the spoil.

After all their consultations, not all the subtlety of twenty solicitors could suggest

any feasible plan—the old man had baffled them at last. It was useless to plead that he was insane, and actually in an asylum at the moment of executing the will. What was the good even if such a plea was successful—if the will was upset, the property would descend to the boy just the same. There seemed no way of getting at it.

But at last a weak point was found. It was a time when a great deal of commotion was made about the Roman Catholic question and the religious education of minors. Now Lucia was certainly half a foreigner, and it was believed she was a Catholic. Aurelian was certainly a Catholic. With all his cunning he had not foreseen this, and he had allowed himself to become a somewhat prominent member of the Catholic community in Stirmingham. He had no religion, but it paid him. Catholics are rich people, and when rich people go insane they are profitable. So he was caught in his own trap.

There was an agitation got up among the ultra-Protestant community. Funds were started to release the heir from the clasp of Rome. The companies, the Corporation, all joined in the outcry. The question was made a national one by the newspapers. But there was one difficulty: the law required that there should be a person to sue. After much trouble this person was selected in one of the Baskettes of American origin, who had settled in Stirmingham, and claimed to be a nearer relation than Aurelian.

The battle was long and furious, and cost heavy sums. No expense was spared on either side, and the estate got still further encumbered. It promised to be a drawn battle; but at last, having passed all the tribunals, it began to approach the place of power, and to be discussed in the Ministerial Cabinet. There was a man there who desired to obtain the Catholic vote of Ireland, and the Aurelian party began to boast already of success. But this very boasting

spoilt their game. The Ministry lost the confidence of the people, the House followed suit, a new Ministry came into place, and the final decision was against the Catholic, or, as they termed themselves, legitimate party—for they said the uncle and the mother were the legitimate guardians.

The result was in truth disappointing to all the parties. The boy was made a ward of Chancery, proper receivers of the estate were appointed, and the companies who had begun to exult were entrapped. The lad was taken from his mother and uncle, and sent to Eton to prepare for college.

Thus a new element of complexity was added to the already chaotic state of this vast estate.

CHAPTER X.

IF ever there was a life that illustrated the oft-quoted phrase "poor humanity," it was that of Sternhold Baskette. But this is not the place to moralise—we must hasten on. The orchestra has nearly finished the overture; the play will soon begin.

Lucia had now no longer any reason for restraint. Her boy was safe—safe as the laws of a great country could make him—certain to inherit a property which by the time he was forty would be of value surpassing calculation. She rejoiced in it, gloried in it. To her it was more welcome than the confirmed guardianship of Aurelian would have been, because it left her free.

The lad was at Eton, and happy—far happier than he could have been elsewhere. His mother immediately commenced a course which led her by a rapid descent to the lowest degradation.

She returned to Paris. Aurelian felt it was useless now to interfere, neither could he afford more expense.

She easily got upon the stage again, and became more popular than ever. At the age of forty she was even more handsome than in her youth. Her features had been refined by the passage of time and by the restraint to which she had been subjected. Her form was more fully developed.

It is unpleasant to linger on this woman's disgrace. She formed a *liaison* with a rich foreign gentleman, retired with him from Paris after a time, and the *Stirmingham Daily Post*, which pursued the Baskettes with unmitigated hatred year after year, did not fail to chronicle the birth of a son.

Aurelian, baffled, was not beaten. He was a resolute and patient man. Like the famous Carthaginian father, he brought up his son and educated him to consider the Baskette estates as the one object of his attention—only in this case it was not for destruction, but for preservation.

When young John Marese Baskette, the heir, after distinguishing himself at Eton, was sent higher up the Thames to Oxford, Aurelian immediately placed his son, Theodore Marese, at the same college.

The result was exactly as he had foreseen. The heir formed a bond of friendship—such as it is in these days—with Theodore. Their one topic of conversation was the estate.

John was full of the most romantic notions. He was in youth a really exemplary lad—clever, hard-working, winning to himself the good will of all men. Theodore had a genuine liking for his cousin—then, at all events, though probably in after life the

attachment he professed was chiefly caused by self interest.

John was full of ambitious dreams. His vivid imagination had been worked upon by the talk among his companions about the famous owner of twenty millions sterling —his father. Upon an old bookstall he obtained a copy of "The Life of Sternhold Baskette," now out of print. It inflamed him to the uttermost. There was good metal in the boy if he had only had friends and parents to put it to proper use. He formed the most extraordinary schemes as to what he would do with this wealth when he became of age, and stepped at one bound into the full enjoyment of it, as he supposed he should.

It was all to be used for the alleviation of the misery of the world, for the relief of the poor, for the succouring of the afflicted, the advancement of all means that could mitigate the penalties attaching to human existence.

As time wore on, however, these benevolent intentions received their first check.

He reached his twenty-first birthday. He claimed his birthright, and was refused. Briefly, the reason was because the companies and the American claimants had entered pleas, and because also the property was terribly encumbered, and would require long years of nursing yet before it could be cleared, and this nursing the higher Courts insisted upon.

Instead of the magnificent income he expected, the young man received two thousand pounds per annum only. It struck his nature a heavy blow, and did much to pervert it, for he looked upon it in the sense of a shameful injustice. With Theodore he left college; at all events he was now his own master, and entered "life."

Every one knows what "life" is to a young man of twenty-one with two thousand a year certain—the power of bor-

rowing to a wide margin, and no monitor to check and retard the inevitable course.

Theodore was much older—fully thirty at this time; but he was as eager for enjoyment, and perhaps more so.

To make the story short, they ran through every species of extravagance—visited Paris, Vienna, and all the continental centres of dissipation.

Ten whole years passed away. John Marese Baskette was by this time a thorough man of the world, deeply in debt, brilliant and fascinating in manner, false and selfish to the backbone. He inherited his mother's beauty. A tall, broad, well-made man, dark curling hair, large dark eyes, and large eyelashes, bronzed complexion, which, when he was excited, glowed with almost womanly brilliance; strong as a lion, gentle in manner, and fierce as a tiger under the velvet glove. Polished and plausible, there were those who deemed him shallow and wholly

concerned with the pleasure of the hour; but they were mistaken.

John Marese Baskette had rubbed off all the soft and good aspirations of his boyhood; but the ambition which was at the bottom of those schemes remained, and had intensified tenfold. He was burning with ambition. The hereditary mind of the Baskettes, their brain power, had descended to him in full vigour (though hitherto he had wasted it), and he also inherited their thirst for wealth. But his idea of obtaining it was totally opposed to the family tradition. The family tradition was a private life devoted with the patience and self-denial of a martyr to the accumulation of gold.

Marese's one absorbing idea was power. To be a ruler, a statesman, a leader, was his one consuming desire. As a ruler he thought, as a member of the Cabinet, it would be easy for him to affect the market in his favour, for Marese was a gambler

already upon a gigantic scale. The Stock Exchange and the Bourse were his arena.

The intense vanity of the man, which led him to seriously hope even for the English Premiership, was, doubtless, a *trait* derived from his mother. "If I had my rights," he was accustomed to say to Theodore, "I should be not only the wealthiest man in England, but in Europe and America. My father's property has more than doubled in value. In England the wealthiest man at once takes a position above crowds of clever people who have nothing but their talents. Without any conceit, I can safely say that I am clever. A clever, wealthy man is so great a rarity that my elevation is a certainty. But nothing can be done without money. At present my wealth is a shadow only. The one thing, Theodore, is money. Our Stock Exchange labour is, in a sense, wasted; our operations are not large enough. What we make is barely sufficient to provide us with

common luxuries (he did not pretend to say necessities) and to keep our creditors quiet. Nothing remains for bolder actions. I am thirty, and I have not yet entered the House."

This last remark was always the conclusion of his reflections. In a sense, it was like Cæsar lamenting upon seeing a statue of Alexander—that he had done nothing at an age when Alexander had conquered the world. He had not even the means to fight the enemies who withheld his birthright from him. The bitterness engendered of these wrongs, the constant brooding over the career that was lost to him, obscured what little moral sense had been left in him after the course of life he had been through; and the once gentle boy was now ripe for any guilt. The verse so often upon the lips of the tyrant was for ever in his mind, and perpetually escaped him unconsciously—

> Be just, unless a kingdom tempt to break the laws,
> For sovereign power alone can justify the cause.

Like his father Sternhold, he looked upon

the undisputed possession of such an estate as conferring powers and position nothing inferior to that of a monarch. His dislike to all things American—in consequence of the claims, now more loudly proclaimed than ever, of the Baskettes from the States—grew to be almost a monomania. He wished that the United States people had but one neck, that he might destroy them all at once—applying the Roman emperor's saying to his own affairs.

His especially favourite study was "The Prince" of Machiavelli, which he always carried with him. His copy was annotated with a scheme for applying the instructions therein given to modern times—the outline of the original requiring much modification to suit the changes in the constitution of society. Some day he hoped to utilise the labours of the man whose name has become the familiar soubriquet of the Devil.

Theodore, whom Aurelian had made

qualify as a surgeon, was imbued with an inherited taste for recondite research. He would return from a wild scene of debauchery at early dawn, and drawing the curtains and lighting his lamp to exclude daylight, plunge into the devious paths of forbidden science. Keen and shrewd as he was, he did not disdain even alchemy, bringing to the crude ideas of the ancients all the knowledge of the moderns. Cruel by nature, he excelled in the manipulation of the dissecting knife, and in the cities upon the Continent where their wanderings led them, lost no opportunity of practising with the resident medical men, or of studying those wonderful museums which are concealed in certain places abroad. Marese was the fiery charger, ready to dash at every obstacle; Theodore was the charioteer—the head which guided and suggested. Yet all their concentrated thought could not devise a method by which Marese might obtain the full enjoyment of his estate. Briefly, this was

the condition of Marese's mind and his position, when the death of Aurelian took place, and a letter reached them written by him in his last hours, entreating their return to Stirmingham for reasons connected with the estate. They went, and a woman went with them as far as London—a woman whom we must meet hereafter, but who shall be avoided as much as possible.

They arrived at Stirmingham unannounced, and examined the papers which the deceased had particularly recommended to their study. Aurelian, as has been said, was baffled but not beaten. The fascination of the vast estate held his mind, as it held so many others, in an iron vice. The whole of his life was devoted to it. He had searched and searched back into the past, groping from point to point, and he had accumulated such a mass of evidence as had never been suspected.

He knew far more even than poor Sternhold, who had occupied himself exclusively with the future.

Marese and Theodore, living quietly in the residence attached to the asylum for the insane, which Aurelian had continued to keep, carefully studied these papers by the light of the lucid commentary the dead man had left. It is needless to recount the whole of the contents—most of them are known already to the reader. But the substance of it all was that three great dangers menaced the estate. The first was the claims of the Baskettes from America.

The evidence which Aurelian had collected was clear that the land they had occupied in the Swamp had been practically theirs, since they had paid no rent; but as to their power of handing it over to Sternhold, it was extremely questionable. The second great danger was the claim of a new tribe that had recently started up—the descendants of James Sibbold, who had also expatriated themselves.

It was doubtful if the transfer made by their ancestors could be maintained, and

for this simple reason — it was doubtful whether James Sibbold himself had any right to the property his sons sold to Sternhold. He was not the eldest son. The eldest son, Arthur, had disappeared for a number of years; but there was not the slightest proof that he had died childless. Far from it. Aurelian, incessantly searching, had found out what no one else yet knew—that Arthur had married, had had children, and that one at least of his descendants was living but a short time since.

When Marese had read thus far his countenance turned livid, and Theodore feared he would have fallen in a fit. The savage passions inherited from his mother surged up in his frame, and overmastered him. He was ill for days, almost unconscious—the shock was so great, his passion so fierce —but presently recovering, read on.

Aurelian had traced Arthur in his wanderings, had traced his marriage—but there was one loophole. Do what he might,

Aurelian could not discover *where* Arthur had married. It was in London, but a minute search failed to discover the church, and the register could not be found.

This fact, and the fact of the long silence, the absence of any claim being put forward, led Aurelian to believe that there really was no legal marriage—that it was only reputed. He hoped as much, at all events.

There was another loophole—the deed which old Sibbold had so treasured in his padlocked oaken chest — the deed which settled the inheritance (on the female as well as the male)—had disappeared. Sternhold had searched for it and failed. It was lost. If the marriage could not be proved, and if the deed was really lost, then there was no danger from Arthur Sibbold's descendants; but there remained those "ifs." Also, if Arthur's claim was put aside, then the succession would of course belong to his brother James Sibbold's descendants: but then again came in the question—Could

these Sibbolds sign away (to Sternhold) an inheritance which at the time was *entailed?*

Aurelian finished with several hints and schemes which need not be gone into here, and indeed were never carried out. But his one great point throughout was a warning against the living descendant of Arthur Sibbold, whose name and present address he had discovered and left for Marese, and against the companies who held the leases. "For," said he, "these companies would foster any and every claim against the estate; anything to bar the succession of Marese, the heir, in order to obtain a grant or extension of time from the courts of law, to enable them to hold the property till the succession to the estate was established." These companies were so rich and powerful that it was difficult to contend against them. Their strength was money, their weapons were the various claimants.

"Therefore," wrote Aurelian, "the first thing is money, and I wish my property to

be used freely for this end, convinced that you will do Theodore full justice; and I bid you, if possible, to take the *weapons* of the companies out of their hands. Without the claimants they are powerless."

These papers, and the facts and reflections they contained, made the deepest impression upon Marese and Theodore. In secret they walked through the city of Stirmingham, and marked its wealth, its vastness, its trade and population.

"And nearly all this is mine," whispered Marese, pale as death in his subdued excitement. He had to hold Theodore's arm to sustain his body, for, strong as he was, he trembled.

Next day they left for London, for Marese could not bear the Tantalus-like view of the wealth which was and was not his. In London they thought and planned as only such men seeking such an end can think and plan.

CHAPTER XI.

WHILE Marese and Theodore are maturing their plans, it will conduce to the easier comprehension of the horrible, complicated events which followed, if the past history of the estate be briefly summed up in such a manner that this chapter can be used for reference.

In the commencement, nearly a century previous to the present time, we have seen old Sibbold, the morose miser, gloating over his money, and studying his title-deeds. These gave him an unquestioned right to the farm he occupied, and to the Swamp, or waste land, which had been squatted on by Will Baskette and his companions. This right mainly depended, though not entirely, upon a certain deed of entail.

Without that deed Sibbold had still sufficient evidence to prove his right to his farm, but not to the Swamp; without that deed there was no fixed succession—that is to say, he could have devised it to any one he chose.

There was, therefore, just the possibility that, hating his eldest son Arthur, he had himself destroyed this deed, in order to prepare the way for his second son, James. But against this supposition there was the known character of the man, which led one to imagine that he would rather have died than give up the smallest fraction of his possessions. At all events, this deed was missing, as were several others of little or no value, such as expired leases of fields to tenants, which had once been kept in Sibbold's oaken press, under padlock and key.

When Sibbold met with his death at the hands of highwaymen, the farm and waste lands, in the natural course of things, would

have passed to his eldest son, Arthur, but he having disappeared, and not appearing to make a claim, James Sibbold, the younger son, took the property. The majority of people always thought, from the fact of Arthur's not returning to claim his birthright, that he had had a hand in the slaughter of old Will Baskette, and that his conscience drove him away.

James Sibbold, after awhile, married, and had several sons. In time he died, and these sons, though married, still all remained living on the farmstead, or in the outhouses; for as it was known that James' right was doubtful, they could not agree about the succession, and preferred to live like pigs rather than go to law and have it settled, since the result was so uncertain. At the same time the squatters, basket-makers, reed-cutters, clothes-peg makers, &c., who resided in the Swamp which the rat had caused, had considerably increased in numbers, and were always called, after

their former chief, by the name of Baskette.

This chief at the date of his death had two sons. The eldest went off with his mother, and joined the original gipsy-tribe; the youngest, whose name or nickname was Romy, entered the service of the clergyman. The eldest was never heard of more; but Romy prospered, and in early middle age bought an estate and country mansion, not far from his birthplace.

It was he who opened up the concealed mineral wealth of coal and iron, and thus, as everything goes by contradiction in this world, it happened that the descendant of gipsies, notorious for their wandering habits and dislike of houses, was the founder of one of the largest cities in the world.

He married with every legal formality, and his son, Sternhold Baskette, imbued with the firmest convictions that in the future the young city would prosper to an unprecedented extent, employed the whole

of the wealth he inherited in purchasing land and erecting houses.

In the course of his transactions he desired to purchase the Wick Farm, where old Sibbold had dwelt, and the Swamp where the Baskette tribe flourished. Finding the title of the vendors imperfect, he devised the strongest safeguard he could think of, which was to make all the Sibbolds then living or known, to sign one document, and all the reputed Baskettes to sign another. He then transhipped them all to America—first, to get complete possession; secondly, in the hope that they would never return to trouble him.

He proceeded to drain the Swamp, and to convert it into the Belgravia of Stirmingham. But this project required an enormous expenditure, and just at that moment the first railway to the place, which he had largely supported, came to a standstill, and ate up all his available capital. When, therefore, a return of commercial prosperity

took place, he found it impossible alone to complete the vast scheme of streets, squares, &c., which had been commenced.

Then the building-lease plan was resorted to—the very keystone of all this curious history. First, the Corporation of the city took a large slice of the uncompleted property of him on a building lease for a term of years, on the expiration of which the whole reverted to him or his heirs (practically his heirs, as he was not likely to live to the age of 120 years).

After they had commenced building some uncertainty arose as to whether or no they had the power to enter into such an agreement; they could bind themselves, but could they bind their successors in office? This took place, it must be remembered, long, long before the recent sanitary legislation, which gives such extensive powers to local bodies.

In order to confirm their proceedings they obtained a private Act of Parliament,

which, when it was drawn up, seemed to be worded clearly enough. But every one knows that after the lapse of thirty years or less, words in an inexplicable manner seem to lose their meaning, and to become capable of more than one interpretation. This is perhaps because the persons who read them are influenced unconsciously by a series of circumstances which did not exist at the time the document was composed.

At any rate, at the date when Marese and Theodore were thinking and scheming, there had already been a great deal of contention over the precise scope of several sentences in this Act: a part of which arose over the question of repairs to the buildings, and partly as to whether, by a little straining, the seventy years of the lease might not be construed to mean practically for ever.

This little straining was managed in this way. When did the lease commence? Had not each successive Mayor got the right to say, "This lease, as interpreted by the Pri-

vate Act, means, not seventy years from the days of my predecessor, but seventy years from the commencement of my term of office." By this way of looking at it, so long as there was a Mayor the Corporation would always have seventy years to look forward to.

Of course all such reasoning was nothing but pure sophistry; but then most law is sophistry, and sophistry when supported by a rich body of men and called Vested Interest, is often much stronger than the highly belauded and really feeble truth.

Here was a tough Gordian knot, to add to the already difficult question of original title. But this was only the preface to the complications to follow. There still remained, after the Corporation had taken a part, a huge howling wilderness of streets with walls two feet high. Companies or syndicates were formed (eight companies in all)—perhaps they had better be called in modern parlance building societies—who

took this howling wilderness on the same system of building leases, to fall in at a certain date.

Apparently in this case it was all plain, straightforward sailing; but not so. Sternhold Baskette got into difficulties over Railway No. 2, and had to borrow money. He also had to borrow money to complete portions of the estate which he had kept in his own hands, and to acquire lands just outside the city. Lastly, he had to borrow money to support the extravagance of his wife. In the aggregate these sums were something enormous.

At the moment of borrowing he was under the impression that he had dealt with independent persons—with financiers, in fact, of London, being so assured by his solicitors. These solicitors had had a pretty picking out of his railways and estates; they had grown fat and prosperous upon him, and might, one would have thought, have been trusted to serve him honestly.

But no—whenever was there a friendship formed in business? Ostensibly, the financiers who advanced the cash were independent; in reality, they acted for certain of these very aforesaid building societies who had taken the building leases! Four at least of them had their money thus out upon good security; and Sternhold, unknowingly at first, owed them a large fortune.

For their own interest they had proved easy creditors. They had not called in the loans; not a fraction of the original sums borrowed from them to complete Railway No. 2, to finish houses, buy fresh lands, to pay for Lucia's extravagance, had been repaid. Very little of the interest had been cleared off; none while Sternhold lived. They knew that they were safe. The railway was now paying a fair dividend, the houses and lands had trebled in value; as for Lucia's waste it was small in comparison—when they chose to call in their money they could seize upon property to

twice the amount due, even with added interest.

But they did not choose to call in their money. The leases were now approaching the day of expiration. They knew that the trustees of Sternhold's estate had not one tithe of the cash required to meet their demands: they would be compelled to submit to one of two things—first, they must yield up a good part of the estate, or they must grant an extension of the leases —either of which would suit the societies exactly.

They intended to push matters in such a way as to compel the trustees to extend the term, in order to retain both halves, as it were, of the estate under their control. This was Gordian knot No. 3. How was the heir to come by his own through all this? It was impossible, unless he could scrape together sufficient money to pay off the loans which had been contracted by his father. He would then be in a position

to claim the property held by the trustees at the expiration of the leases, which was now fast approaching.

The other four companies had got wind of this nice little arrangement, and it upset them extremely. They had not been half so shrewd as their fellows, and that was a bitter reflection. They foresaw their valuable properties passing away from them, while the other societies held fast to their share. It was gall and wormwood.

But they were not to be outdone in the Art of Entanglement. Sternhold was dead; they could not lend him money. But the heir, our friend Marese, was living, and living "fast;" and not only that, he was speculating heavily upon the Stock Exchange. Here was a fine opening. With careful and judicious management they bought up all Marese's debts; they lent him money to a large amount through their agents, keeping themselves in the background out of sight; and they had

gentlemen always on the watch on the Exchange, whose business it was to tempt Marese into apparently good bargains with floating paper.

Not content with this, they had still further secured themselves. They had allied themselves with a certain powerful and enterprising railway company. This company had hitherto been shut out of Stirmingham, and were extremely desirous of getting access to it. These second four societies combined, and declared that in the interests of the properties committed to their charge (save the mark!) it was essential that there should be more direct railway communication with a certain district which it is immaterial to name, and that there should be a station close to their portion of the estate, the other stations being at some distance. The enterprising railway company would guarantee good terms if the trustees of the estate would enter into agreement with them.

The upshot was that another Act of Parliament was obtained by the influence of the said powerful railway company, authorising this line, station, and agreement. It was now argued that this Act and agreement would override the original building leases; especially as the railway company were prepared to prove that they had not yet reaped any reasonable benefit, and, unless the leases were extended, would be serious losers. As they had immense interest in the House, they were likely enough to gain their point. Here were two more Gordian knots, Nos. 4 and 5!

Then there was the list of claimants to the estate, which had now been swelled from all parts of the world, and the series of suits and pleas, and Heaven knows what other litigation threatened by them, making Gordian knot No. 6. Finally, the estate was in Chancery. Knot No. 7.

Here was a pleasant prospect for the

heir! To put all the rest on one side, on the day that the building leases expired, and he stepped forward to claim his rights, the building societies would present him with the following neat little bill :—

Societies 1, 2, 3, 4 :—

To Loans advanced for completion of Railway	£123,000	0	0
To Interest on same at 4 per cent. .	50,000	0	0
To Loans advanced for completion of Houses, and Purchase of Estates	240,000	0	0
To Interest on the same at 3 per cent.	38,000	0	0
To Private Loans on Bills [to Sternhold Baskette] at 5 per cent. . .	20,000	0	0
To Interest on the same	3,000	0	0
TOTAL	£474,000	0	0

Societies 5, 6, 7, 8 :—

To Private Loans on Bills [to Marese Baskette] at 8 and 10 per cent. .	£65,000	0	0
To Interest on the same	11,000	0	0
To Paper Transactions as per Bill of Particulars, due	80,000	0	0
To Advances on Railway Extension, as per Parliamentary Act . . .	118,000	0	0
TOTAL	£304,000	0	0

Total of Bills to meet before taking possession of property on expiration of leases, £778,000.

"After all," said Marese to Theodore, as they planned and schemed, and smoked cigars at 120*s.* the hundred, "after all, old fellow, this is but one year's income if I could only get possession. And I believe we could finance the thing and raise the money without difficulty, if it were not for those cursed, hateful claimants from America and elsewhere. The Jews fight shy on account of the title difficulty. If we could but get rid of those claimants!"

CHAPTER XII.

THERE was once a very wise man who invented what was considered a saying almost inspired, which was afterwards inculcated as a most important lesson by mighty princes upon their sons, and continues to be constantly quoted in our day with approval—it is, that "Unity is strength." But the strength of the claimants to the Baskette estate consisted in the number of their scattered forces.

All that Marese, the heir, could have desired was that by some means they could be condensed into one person, and thus destroyed at a blow. They had increased as the years went by in a geometrical ratio, till the total formed a small battalion.

When the idea of making claims upon

the estate first arose in America, there were already quite fifty families who in one way or another thought they had "rights." About a dozen visited Stirmingham, and all but drove poor old Sternhold frantic. That was a generation ago, and the tribe had nearly trebled. Mothers of children who had the remotest possible chance of a share in the prize took care to have them christened Baskette or Sternhold. There were Sternhold Baskette Browns, Baskette Johnsons, Baskette Stirmingham Slicks, English Baskette Williamsons, and every possible combination of Baskette.

Those who, either by the male or female side, really could show some species of proof that they were descended from the seventeen squatters who were transhipped to the States now numbered no less than one hundred and forty-three individuals—men, women, and children. To distinguish themselves from other claimants, they called themselves "The True Swampers."

But in addition to these, there was a host of other Baskettes, who in one way or another foisted in their names. There were Baskets, Bascots, Buscots, Biscuits, Buschcotts, Bosquettes—every conceivable variation of spelling from every State and territory, who declared that they were related to the parent stem of Will Baskette, the squatter, who was shot by old Sibbold. These might be called for distinction the pseudo-Baskettes.

Then among the True Swampers there was an inner circle, who professed to have prominent "rights" on account of their progenitors having been more nearly related to the original Will Baskette. They argued that the others were not true Baskettes, and had only adopted that name from the chief, while they were real blood Baskettes.

In addition, there was another host of people who made a virtue of proclaiming that they were not named Baskette. They did not profess to be named Baskette—

they did not take a name which was not theirs! They were Washingtons, Curries, Bolters, Gregorys, Jamesons, and so on. But they had claims because their father's wives were of the Baskette blood.

Finally, there was another sub-division who loudly maintained that half of the original cotters who landed in New York were not Baskettes, but Gibbs, Webbes, Colborns, and so on, and that they were the descendants of these people. And there were some who went the length of declaring that they were descended from two alleged illegitimate sons of old Romy Baskette!

The Baskette Battalion was therefore made up of—1st. The Pure Blood Baskettes; 2nd. The True Swampers; 3rd. Demi-Baskettes, who had that name added to another; 4th. Nominal Baskettes, whose names had an accidental resemblance; 5th. The Feminine Baskettes, descended from women of Baskette strain; 6th. Inde-

pendent Squatters, not Baskettes, but companions; 7th. Illegitimate Baskettes!

Then there were the Sibbolds—such a catalogue! These had been slower to wake up to their "rights" than the Baskettes, but when they did discover them they came in crowds. First, there were the descendants, in a straight line, of the eight sons of James Sibbold, shipped (six with families) to New York. They had multiplied exceedingly, and there was no end to them. The simply Sibbolds, as we may call them, numbered no less than two hundred and eighteen, all told —men, women, and children. Every one of these had some register, some old book—many of these books were worm-eaten copies of Tom Paine's "Rights of Man"—some piece of paper or other to prove that they had the blood of James Sibbold in their veins.

Then there were all the ramifications, pretty much like the Baskette branches; innumerable cadets distantly related, innumerable people whose wife's uncle's mother or

cousin's name was Sibbold; and all the various Sibbolde, Sibboldes, Sibald, Sigbeld, Sybels, Sibils, Sibelus, Sibilsons, *ad libitum*. Illegitimate Sibbolds were as plentiful as blackberries, and all ready to argue the merits of the case with revolver and bowie. If the Baskettes made up a battalion, the Sibbolds formed an army!

Between these two great divisions there was the bitterest enmity. The Baskettes derided the claims of the Sibbolds; the Sibbolds derided those of the Baskettes. The Sibbolds told the Baskettes that they were an ill-conditioned lot; if they had been respectable people, and really his relations, old Sternhold would never have shipped them to America out of his sight. The Baskettes retorted that the Sibbolds were ashamed to stay in England, for they were the sons of a murderer; they were the descendants of a dastardly coward, who shot a man through a window. The Sibbolds snarled, and pointed out that the

great chief of the Baskettes was nothing but a thief, caught in the act and deservedly punished; a lot of semi-gipsies, rogues, and vagabonds. Their very name showed that they were but basket-makers; they were not even pure gipsy blood—miserable squatters on another man's property.

Blows were not unfrequently exchanged in the saloons and drinking-stores over these quarrels. The result was the formation of two distinct societies, each determined to prosecute its own claim and to oust the other at all hazards. The Baskette battalion relied upon the admitted non-payment of rent by their forefathers to upset all subsequent agreements, and they agreed also that this agreement which their forefathers had signed was not binding on the remote descendants. The document was obtained by trickery, and the land was not put to the use the vendors had understood it was to be put, as the representatives

now alleged, to simple agricultural purposes. Further, each of those who signed the document only gave up his cottage and the small plot of garden round it; they did not sell the waste land between the islands.

The Sibbolds principal argument was that their forefathers could not sign away an entailed estate without previously cutting off the entail, and it was acknowledged that this had not been done. But, said the Baskettes, there was a question if the land ever was entailed; let the Sibbolds produce the deed, and if it was not entailed, where was their claim?

Each of these divisions formed itself into a society, with a regular committee and place of meeting, a minute-book to record accumulated evidence, legal gentlemen to advise, corresponding secretaries, and Heaven knows what. They actually issued gazettes —printed sheets of intelligence. There was the *Baskette Gazette* and the *Sibbold Gazette*, which papers carefully recorded all deaths,

marriages, and new claims. There was a complete organisation, and a fine thing it was for the lawyers and some few sharp young men.

Of late these societies had received more or less cordial overtures from the eight building societies at Stirmingham who held the leases. The first four societies encouraged the Baskette battalion, the second held out hopes to the Sibbolds. The cunning building societies, without committing themselves, desired nothing better than protracted litigation between these claimants and the heir, in the certainty that meantime they should reap the benefit.

Among the American corps of claimants there were men of all classes—from common labourers, saloon-keepers, &c., up to judges, editors, financiers, merchants; and many of them were clever, far-seeing persons, who, without putting any weight upon the somewhat strained "rights" they professed to believe in, still thought that there was

"something in it, you know," and money might be got by persistent agitation, if it was only hush-money.

Throughout many turbulent States there was at one time quite a feeling aroused against England (which added its venom to the unfortunate *Alabama* business), as having unjustly kept what was due to American citizens. These societies had their regular agents in Stirmingham and London, whose duty it was to report every change that took place, every variation of the case, and to accumulate evidence and transmit it. These bulletins were received by the "caucuses," and sometimes printed in the *Gazettes*.

Besides these regular organisations, who had money at disposal and were really formidable, there were several free lances careering over the country, representing themselves as the sons of the elder brother of Romy Baskette, the brother who had disappeared with the gipsies. These were

downright impostors, and yet got a living out of the case. Several lecturers also promenaded the States, who made a good thing of it by giving a popular version of the story, illustrated by a diorama of incidents in the lives of the principal actors, from the shooting of Will Baskette to the appearance of Lucia Marese as Lady Godiva. It was singular that no one presented himself as a descendant of Arthur Sibbold; he seemed to have been quite forgotten. So much for America.

From Australia there came, time after time, the most startling reports, as is usual when any *cause celèbre* is proceeding in the Old World. Now, it was a miner at the diggings who had made extraordinary disclosures; now, some shepherd on a sheep-run, after a fit of illness, found his memory returned, and recollected where important deeds were deposited.

Nothing, however, came of it. The principal seats of disturbance were America

and England; for England produced a crop of what we may call Provisional, or Partial Claimants. Here and there, scattered all over the country—from Kent to Cornwall, from Hampshire to Northumberland—were people of the name of Baskette, which is a very ancient English cognomen, and to be found in every collection of surnames.

Most of these were of little or no consequence, but one or two held good positions as gentlemen or merchants. None of these latter made the shadow of a pretence to the estate, but they were fond of speculating as to their possible remote connection with the now famous Baskette stock; and some said that if anything did turn up, if any practical results followed the American attempt, it would be as well to be prepared to take a share in the spoil.

There were also at least three impostors—utter scoundrels, who obtained a profusion of drink and some sustenance from credu-

lous fools in tap-rooms by pretending that they were descendants of the elder brother of Romy Baskette. They had not the shadow of a proof, and ought to have been treated to a dose of "cell."

A gipsy-tribe, a travelling clan which went about the country with shooting galleries, merry-go-rounds, peep-shows, and so on, were in the habit of proclaiming that they were the very identical tribe from whom offshoots settled in the historical swamp at Wolf's Glow, in order to attract custom.

Certain persons in and around Stirmingham, whose fathers or ancestors had sold lands to Sternhold Baskette—lands now worth ten, and in some cases a thousand, times the price he had given for them—had a fallacious idea that if the title of the heir was upset, they would have a chance of regaining possession, or at least of an additional payment for the property.

They formed themselves into a loosely-

compacted society to protect their interest. It was remarkable that in England, as in America, no one set up a claim to be the descendant of Arthur Sibbold. The real danger was from America, the land of organisation.

But in England there was a class of persons who, without possessing any personal interest in the matter, made it their especial business to collect all the "ana" that could be discovered, and gained a livelihood out of their study of the case. More than one private inquiry office in London received large fees from New York clients to make special investigations. The credulity of mankind is exhibited in a striking manner in the support given to these offices. How should they be supposed to be so devotedly attached to the cause of one client? What is to prevent them having fifty, all with the same end, and from selling the information gained from one to the other?

There were men who made it a speciality

of their trade to collect all books, pamphlets, pictures, lectures, genealogies, deeds, documents, letters, papers, *souvenirs*—anything and everything, from Sternhold Baskette's old hat upwards, that could be twisted into relation with the case.

Those who have never had any leaning towards antiquarian research have no idea of the enormous business done in this way—not only in reference to great cases of this kind, but in reference to matters that would appear to an outsider as absolutely not worth a thought. There is scarcely a scrap of written or printed paper of the last century, or up to within fifty years of the present date, which has not got its value to such a collector, for he knows there will be fools to buy them. Sometimes it happens that an apparently worthless piece of paper or parchment, bought as waste, turns out, under his sharp eye, to be a really awkward thing for some owner of property unless he purchases it.

There were lawyers in a peculiar way of business who did not disdain this species of work, and presently they may cross our path. Such men were in constant communication with people on the other side of the Atlantic, where there is, year by year, an increasing desire manifested to trace out genealogies.

The year in which, in the ordinary course of events, the building societies and the Corporation must relinquish their expired leases was now fast approaching. Some such person as has been described was seized with a brilliant idea, and made haste to advertise it. Why should not all the claimants to the estate meet on the disputed spot at this critical moment? Why should there not be a regular family council, the largest and most important that had ever taken place? The idea was a good one, and spread like wildfire. The newspapers took it up; the American societies thought highly of it. Nothing like a grand demonstration.

The upshot was that Stirmingham began to look forward to the assembling of these would-be monarchs of the city, which was finally, after much discussion, fixed for the next New Year's Day.

This New Year's Day was fast approaching, while Marese and Theodore planned.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE grand family council was to be held at Stirmingham on the coming New Year's Day. How difficult it is to trace the genesis of an idea! It does not seem to have any regular growth—to begin with a seed and cast out roots, a stem, branches, leaves; it shoots now one way, now this, like those curious creatures revealed by the microscope, or like the germs of fungi. Upon the original thought odd branches are engrafted, accidental circumstances suggest new developments, till at last the full completed idea bears no sort of resemblance to what might have been expected from the embryo.

How the idea was first started neither Marese nor Theodore could tell, nor how it

was communicated from one to the other. There is a method of communication which is not dependent upon direct speech; there is a way of talking at a subject without mentioning it. When two clever men's minds are full of one absorbing topic it does not require formal sentences to convey their conceptions. They did not seem even to actually talk of it, and yet it grew and grew, till it overshadowed them like a vast gloomy mountain.

It would not be just to so much as hint at a latent insanity in these men's minds, for it would partly absolve them from responsibility, and would dispose their judges to regard their crimes leniently. Certainly no one, if asked to do so, could have pointed out two keener men of the world than these. Yet, somehow, despite one's reluctance to afford them the shadow of an excuse, there does creep in the conviction that such a ghastly conception could only be formed in a brain lacking

the moral organs, if such an expression may be used, in a brain unbalanced with natural human sympathy.

Marese's father, old Sternhold, had certainly been mad at one period of his career. His mother, Lucia, had exhibited a vanity so overweening, and a temper so intense, that at times it resembled lunacy. It may have been that, along with the mental powers of calculation and invention which distinguished old Romy and Sternhold, Marese had also inherited the mental weakness of Sternhold and Lucia.

Theodore had shown a taste for extraordinary studies usually avoided by healthy-minded men. His father, Aurelian, had passed the whole of his time with insane patients, and it is said that too much contact with mad people reacts upon the sane. He had early initiated his son into the mysteries of that sad science of the mind which deals with its deficiences. The son's youth had been passed in constant

intercourse with those harmless and, so to say, *reasonable* lunatics who are to be met with in the homes and at the dinner-tables of medical men, and whose partial sanity and occasional singular flashes of unnatural intelligence are perhaps more calculated to affect the minds of others than the vagaries of the downright mad.

In one short sentence, this terrible crime, which was looming over Marese and Theodore, was nothing less than the deliberate intention to destroy the whole of the claimants to the estate at once. How it originated it is difficult to imagine, but it did. It might perhaps be partly traced to the injunction in Aurelian's papers to take the weapons out of the hands of the companies; or partly to the oft-expressed wish of Marese's, after the Roman emperor, that all the claimants had but one neck, so that he might cut it. The said emperor has much to answer for.

The announced gathering of the claimants

at Stirmingham certainly seemed to bring them all within the reach of the fowler's net, if he could but cast it aright. Marese and Theodore had half-formed ideas of blowing the whole company into the air as they sat at council in the Sternhold Hall on New Year's Day, something after the fashion of Guy Fawkes, but with a deadlier compound than he had at his disposal—nitro-glycerine or dynamite; especially the first might be trusted to do the work much more effectually than gunpowder, which was also more difficult to conceal on account of its bulk.

It will barely be believed that these two men, in the height of the nineteenth century, calmly examined the vault under that famous hall, in order to see if it was fitted for the purpose. This hall or assembly-room had been finished about the time that the agitation commenced over the heir to the estate, just before Sternhold had married, when the Corporation heaped

flattery upon him. It had been named after him.

It was a fine room, not too large, and yet of sufficient size to seat an audience. The object was to afford a concert-room for dramatic and theatrical performances, and also for balls. As the site was valuable, and every particle of space had to be utilised in the centre of this mighty city, it had been built over vaults, which were intended for bonded warehouses; but partly on account of the high rent asked, and partly because of the dampness of the cellars—the site was the very centre of the old Swamp—had never been occupied. The access was bad, and there was no place for a display or advertisement, which was another reason why the cellars had not let. There was a certain amount of propriety in holding what was to be called "The Grand Centennial Family Council" in this hall, built upon the centre of the ancient Swamp, and named after the founder of the city.

Marese and Theodore, in disguise, examined the vaults, under the pretence of being agents for London merchants desirous of opening business in Stirmingham. There was hardly any necessity for this precaution, for it was so many years since they had openly resided in the place that few would have recognised them.

To their great surprise, these vaults, whose gloomy darkness they explored by the light of lanterns, extended in one vast cavern, under the whole of the hall. Instead of a series of cellars, there was one huge cavern. This was occasioned by the flooring not being supported upon brick arches, as would have been architecturally preferable, but upon timber posts, or pillars. The place had, in fact, been put up hastily, and the vaults were never completed. The timber pillars were placed in regular order, and it had been intended to build brick partitions; but as no one seemed to care to occupy the cellars, this had never been

done. The floor was extremely damp, and the whole appearance of the place repulsive. Snails, toads, and slimy reptiles crawled about, and this under the very stage above, upon which music, song, and dance were wont to enliven the gay hearts of the audiences.

One great obstacle to the idea of blowing up the place was the height of these timber posts, which was full eighteen feet, so that the roof of the vault was high over head, and any explosives, to produce the full effect, would have to be piled up on casks or stands. Then the hall was larger than they had supposed, and it was apparent that the coming council would occupy but a portion of it, and perhaps change that portion now and then, so that it would be uncertain where to place the nitro-glycerine.

The idea, looked at from a distance and in the abstract, seemed feasible enough; but when they came to face the physical difficul-

ties, it was found to be hard of realisation. There was the danger of getting the explosives into the place, the danger of detection, and, finally, the chance of an accident hoisting the engineer with his own petard, especially at that time of the year when nitro-glycerine was notoriously dangerous on account of the crystals which cold formed upon its surface, and the least jar or shake was sufficient to cause an explosion. Obviously, the plan was a cumbrous one, and without hesitation it was abandoned.

But the main idea, that of getting rid of the claimants at one blow, was not abandoned; it grew and grew, and occupied their minds day and night. At last the thought of transferring the Guy Fawkes expedient from the land to the ocean, which, once the deed was successfully accomplished, would tell no tale, occurred to them.

The claimants must come over on shipboard, if only they could be got into one or even two ships; and if these vessels sank

upon the voyage suddenly without a warning! This was certainly much safer for the conspirators, as no trace would be left, and it was surer of success, because in the hall some of the victims might escape —at sea they could scarcely do so. They ran over in their minds the various methods of scuttling ships which have been invented from time to time.

There was the good old simple plan of boring holes in the bottom with augurs. There was the devilish coal-shell. A box painted to resemble coal, but really containing powder, was thrown among the coal, and when placed in the furnace blew up the boiler, and destroyed the ship. There was the ship-rat—a contrivance by which the very motion of the vessel caused an augur in a box to bore its way through, and so cause a leak. Some benevolent socialists, anxious for the welfare of man, had also promulgated a notion of exploding nitro-glycerine by clockwork, arranged to

go so long, and set to act just as the vessel was farthest from land.

But all these seemed to Marese and Theodore clumsy, risky, and, what was worse, uncertain of operation. It was reserved for Marese to suggest the deadliest of all destructive engines, and he arrived at its conception in this way. He had, as it were, a double mind. He was liable to flashes of inspiration—such as it was—to sudden ideas which shot through him without endeavour. He had also the power of concentrating his thoughts, and bringing the regular forms of logic to his assistance. But this latter method he could only practise with the aid of pen and ink; and it was his constant habit, whenever contemplating an important step, such as a coup upon the Exchange, to write out his plans in a regular sequence, just as he wished them to take place.

This written guide he corrected and enlarged until it seemed beyond any further

improvement; and then shutting his eyes to all consequences, resolutely avoiding those secret promptings which suggest that something has been left undone, he was accustomed to rush at the matter in hand, and dispose of it with bold, unhesitating strokes. This method certainly had its advantages, but it had also the disadvantage that if by any accident his notes fell into other hands, he was lost.

Nevertheless, after thinking and thinking in vain over this great problem, and failing of any very brilliant flash of intelligence, Marese at last resorted to his favourite system, and sought the solution by the aid of pen and ink. First he wrote at the top of his rough draft—

"What is it that I desire? Define it. Definition: to destroy the claimants. Who are the claimants? A body of men. How is a body of men to be destroyed? In the same way as a single person. How is man destroyed? By the knife, by bullets, by

explosives, by garotting, by fire, by water, by poison, narcotics."

Such were his rough premises. Then he laid the pen down and thought. Why not set the vessels these men were coming over in on fire? That at first seemed to him a most feasible plan, far superior to the uncertain action of explosives. It required some arrangement, which he felt confident the scientific knowledge of Theodore could easily supply, to cause the flames to break out at the proper moment.

He began to grow enraptured with it. It seemed so easy and sure. Then, picturing in his mind the vessel sinking, the thought occurred to him that if the risk was to be run, something might as well be got out of it. Why not put a cargo on board insured far beyond its value, and so kill two birds with one stone?

At one blow to destroy his enemies and fill his own pockets was superb triumph! He called Theodore and explained the idea

to him. Theodore was struck with it—especially with the notion of making a profit out of the risk. He was, however, considerably opposed to the insurance dodge, on the ground that it had been tried so often, and people had got so keen that it was ten to one if some suspicion did not arise, especially when it was seen what an object it would be to Marese to secure the destruction of the passengers. Some other plan must be adopted. Suppose, for instance, they took Marese's yacht and followed the vessel, and after its partial destruction, if they could secure only partial destruction, put in a claim for salvage To do this they must encounter serious difficulties, but it would be far less risky.

Marese wished to know what substances they could employ to produce a fire which could not be extinguished without some special chemical composition. Theodore produced a series of manuscript volumes containing the notes which he had accumu-

lated during his long and curious studies. He turned them over one by one, extracting such information as appeared applicable to their purpose, while Marese, waiting for his friend's reply, amused himself by reading pieces here and there. It was while thus employed that the devilish means by which their end could be obtained occurred to him.

CHAPTER XIV.

HE happened to light on a volume of notes made upon the remarkable properties of gases. They began with a description of those curious caves and even meadows abroad wherein no animal can live, and the place is strewn with the bones of birds and beasts who have incautiously entered the infected circle. This effect was proved to proceed from a vapour which rose up from the earth, and was no sooner breathed than it produced asphyxiation. Animals who inhaled it fell as if shot, so sudden was the action.

Gases as deleterious were often generated in wells, caves, and confined places, such as the huge tuns or casks used by brewers to keep their beer in, and which had often

proved fatal to the men who attempted to scour them out.

Theodore believed that the cold shiver which some persons affected to feel upon entering a churchyard and passing over the graves of the dead, was caused by the presence of a gas in small quantities, evolved from the decaying remains beneath the feet. Then there were gases which upon inhalation caused a profound slumber; others which had precisely an opposite result, and made the patient lively and brisk; and others which rendered the person who took them perfectly insensible to surgical operations.

Marese, a man who had never paid the least regard to science, was deeply struck with these facts, with which the veriest tyro in chemistry is well acquainted. But he did what no tyro or even advanced student would perhaps have done—he applied his discovery—for so it was to him—to his own circumstances.

There are, says Bacon, three modes of

reading—one to pass away an idle hour, one to acquire a knowledge of a subject, and the third and the most advantageous method is always to keep your own ends in view, and to apply everything to your object.

In these gases Marese found his desideratum. His engine of destruction burst upon his mind, as it were, complete in a moment. Some such poisonous gas should be shipped on board these vessels, closely confined in a box or other receptacle, and at the proper moment liberated, to spread throughout the steamer a subtle vapour which no man could see coming, and against which strength, skill, and discipline would be perfectly powerless.

Theodore, looking up, saw a change upon Marese's countenance, and immediately knew that something had occurred to him. The heir was pale as death; his own conception, so ghastly and treacherous, filled him with a nameless horror at the same moment that he never hesitated in his purpose.

After awhile he took up a pen and added to his already written premises the conclusion —his idea in a few brief sentences—and handed it to Theodore. He left it to Theodore to select the gas, and to arrange the mechanical details. He had sown the seed, the other must patiently tend it. And the other did patiently tend it; and this is what it grew to.

The name of the gas which Theodore at last, after much thought, fixed upon shall not be here disclosed; for although it is well-known to chemists, and any one who can read could easily find it, there is no knowing what imitations might not spring up if they were aware of the means being so ready at hand.

Though suicide is such a simple and obvious expedient in difficulties, yet there are scores who do not commit it because they never think of it. If some kind friend suggested the pistol or the knife they would at once employ it.

Gas had one property which rendered it peculiarly fitted for the purpose in view. Being elastic, it could be compressed to a great extent, and thus an immense volume might be contained in a small compass. Therefore the case or receptacle to hold the vapour poison need not be of large dimensions; and this was a matter of some importance.

The gas chosen was not in any way explosive; on the contrary, it had the property of extinguishing any light which was placed in it—there was thus no danger of any accidental circumstance causing an explosion at an awkward moment. It was absolutely safe—the operator ran no risk, provided always that he did not inhale the vapour.

Theodore sketched out a case about three feet square, which was to be formed of an outer box of deal, and an inner skin of thin iron. Into this case, which would be tolerably strong, he proposed to pump a vast volume

of gas, taking care that the pressure should not exceed the power of the box to withstand. The aperture through which it had been pumped was then to be hermetically sealed with molten lead.

The greatest difficulty was to provide for the escape of the devilish vapour at the proper moment; and this caused the projectors much reflection. Clockwork was objectionable; it was liable to injury from jars and shakes. Cases of this character, which looked strong and substantial, and would be placed in the hold, would be certain to receive the roughest of usage.

At one time he conceived the idea of relying upon the cupidity of the seamen. It was suspected that many of the accidents which had taken place at sea, and caused the destruction of hundreds by fire, had arisen through dishonest seamen or *employés* on board going at night with a candle into the compartment where valuable goods were stowed, and dropping sparks.

Why not utilise this propensity? Mark the case "watches," "jewellery," or "bullion," cause it to be surrounded with a certain amount of mystery and precaution enough to engender suspicion; and leave the rest to the chisel and drill of the would-be thief.

But this, though clever, was too uncertain. Another idea which occurred to him was to have a wooden case only, but a strong one, and to confine in a small hole prepared for the purpose one of the boring insects, which in a certain time would be sure to eat its way through and leave an aperture.

This, too, was more ingenious than practicable. He was delayed for a time. Accident solved the difficulty. Passing through the streets, he was stopped by a crowd which had collected around a quack doctor.

"See," cried the vendor of patent vegetable pills, "here is the horrid stuff the allopathists, the doctors and physicians sell

to you at high prices. Here is a common drug used by them in this phial. I will pour some of the liquid upon the hard stone pavement—just see how it acts upon the granite, and then guess how your wretched stomachs must be abused."

He poured it on the stone—the crowd pressed forward, and saw it eat a hole. "Aquafortis," thought Theodore, and the idea was his—aquafortis was the agent he wanted.

He passed on, and left the crowd thoroughly convinced of the tricks played by the medical faculty, and purchasing largely of the vegetable pills. Theodore had found a substance which would eat through his iron and wood cases, and leave an aperture—a substance, too, whose action was equal, and could be regulated to a sufficiently accurate extent.

Upon reflection, however, and after making several experiments, he did not employ ordinary aquafortis, but another

acid eqally powerful, and which was still more regular in its action. He tried the experiment time after time, till at last he obtained the proper strength, and fixed the requisite amount of acid to eat through a given thickness of iron and wood in a certain time. He repeated the experiment till he was absolutely certain of the result.

The plan had now grown delightfully clear and well-defined—the infernal machine became of the simplest construction. All that had to be done was to place the acid in the case confined in a small and very thin copper vessel (lined with an enamel to resist it), which was to be screwed to one side of the case, then pump the gas in, hermetically seal it, heave the whole thing on board the steamer, and leave it to work its way. Delightfully simple!

He called Marese to look over his drawings, and to witness his experiments with the acid. Marese was enchanted; his confidence in Theodore's scientific resources

was confirmed. There was, however, one question he asked—Was the gas so strong and so poisonous that the small quantity confined in a case three feet square would destroy a whole ship's company? Would not the gas escape, rise up, and dissipate itself through the port-holes, up the hatch-ways, and be further weakened by the breezes that blew and caused draught in various places between decks? These ocean steamers were very roomy.

Theodore was delighted to have an opportunity of explaining the properties and nature of the vapour to his friend. The peculiarity of this gas was that, although an invisible fluid, it was extremely heavy —it was heavier far than atmospheric air. He easily proved that a gas might be heavier than air by a well-known experiment with a vapour (not the one to be used in this case) which he poured out of a glass phial over a candle. The invisible gas descended and extinguished the candle.

There was not the slightest chance of the poison-vapour escaping quickly through ports or up hatchways. It would, as it were, cling to the vessel. The pressure inside the case would cause it to issue rapidly from the aperture eaten out by the acid. It would then diffuse itself laterally, and gradually penetrate into every crevice and corner of the ship. The effect would be that one by one every person on board would inhale it, and in an instant, let the quantity breathed be never so small, down he would drop, or grow rigid as he sat—unconscious was the word Theodore used as an euphuism for death. He did not mention another effect it would have, lest the horror of it should cause even Marese to falter.

Theodore traced out the probable course of events on board the fated vessel. First, the persons working or living in the cabins and places nearest the case would feel the effect and succumb. Then there would be

alarm and excitement—others would rush to the spot, and they would immediately fall, just as the birds and beast did who entered those fatal caves abroad. One man on board, perhaps, might detect the cause —the surgeon, or any doctor who chanced to be a passenger—and might cry out to man the boats and escape; but who, in the hurry and excitement, would heed him?—he would not have time to escape himself, much less to explain the danger to others. It was doubtful whether even so much as a signal of distress would be hoisted. The crew, the officers, the passengers would be so completely puzzled, so utterly at their wit's end, that no course would suggest itself to them before it was too late.

In this respect the gas had an immense advantage over any apparatus which would set the ship on fire. Let the fire be never so rapid, one boat at least might get away, and on that boat the very person whom it was most desirable should seek the floor of the

ocean. Moreover, fire could be seen from a vast distance, and might attract attention from other vessels, who by day would observe the smoke, and by night the glare of the flames.

But in this case probably not so much as a flag would be hoisted. One by one the seamen and passengers, the captain and officers, would succumb to the invisible vapour, first becoming weak and helpless, and next "unconscious." The steersman would fall at the wheel. The engineer would drop at his engine; the stoker as he shovelled up the coal; the passenger would lie in his berth. And the steamer, so long as the fuel in the furnace lasted, would pursue her way unguided over the waves; finally, after a few hours, to float a derelict at the mercy of the wind.

There was a completeness, a finish, an elaboration of detail about this scheme which fascinated the conspirators. It was so novel, daring, and yet safe, it enchanted

them. When at last the great horror was discovered, what risk would there be? Nothing on board would excite suspicion. The gas had actually no smell; besides, long before anything was discovered, it would have dissipated itself.

Even if the whole of the cargo was examined, the case itself would offer no handle to an inquirer. The powerful acid would have eaten its way out, and nothing would be left but a small empty case with a hole in it. Nothing need show who consigned the case. Better still: Marese's yacht would follow the doomed steamer, keeping close on pretence of the safety of having company in a voyage across the Atlantic.

They would easily know when the desired result was obtained by the view of the steamer rolling helplessly in the trough of the waves. By the time that was the case some hours would have elapsed after the catastrophe, and various pretences could be

arranged to avoid immediately proceeding on board—especially as from a distance nothing would look the matter—and by then the poisonous vapour would have dissipated itself, or so mixed with the air as to have lost its fatal power. They would then take charge of the vessel and bring it into port, and claim the salvage.

If they contrived to select a vessel which carried a valuable cargo, that salvage money would be something extremely large in amount, added to the value of the steamer itself. They might manœuvre to get such a cargo stored. This would be far superior to the clumsy dodge of sinking the ship and claiming the insurance money.

As to getting the case on board, it was as easy as could be. Having proceeded to New York in Marese's yacht, taking with them the necessary apparatus for producing the gas (which was very simple), and pumping it into the case, they could ascertain the hour of the steamer's departure, fill the case,

regulate the acid for say four, or perhaps three days, and send it on board only a little while before she started. They would then, on board the yacht, proceed to sea on a cruise and keep the steamer in sight.

Delightfully simple! Perfectly complete and scientific in every detail!

Marese once again asked if the gas was really so powerful? Theodore referred to his note-books, and showed him an extract from a newspaper not of so very remote a date, wherein it was stated that at a conference of the various leading European Powers it had been resolved not to employ certain implements in warfare, such as explosive shells or bullets under a certain size, and poisonous gases or vapours which could be thrown into a fortress or town in shells. Marese was convinced, and regarded the engine as perfect.

Thus did two men deliberately plan out the destruction of several hundreds of their fellow-beings without one single thought or

reflection upon the misery and suffering they would cause, or upon the intrinsic villany of the act.

Well was it suggested by a French thinker that certain natures are incapable of feeling, incapable of remorse so long as they remain "faithful to the logic of their type"—*i.e.*, faithful to their own selfish interests and passions.

CHAPTER XV.

WITH his own hands Theodore constructed the infernal machine and prepared the materials for generating the deadly vapour at the shortest notice. This, the first part of the scheme, having been settled, there remained two great difficulties to overcome. The first was to get the claimants on board one vessel—travelling in a body; and the second was to secure their passage by a steamer carrying a valuable cargo, so as to increase the gain of salvage money to the utmost.

It was not easy to manage the first matter; the latter Marese thought he saw his way through. It happened just then that the payment of the war indemnity to Germany caused a great drain of gold from

this country; the value of the precious metals consequently rose, and the imports increased to meet the demand. Gold and silver came in large quantities from New York, both in coin and bullion—especially silver.

Marese intended to take advantage of this fact. By means of certain Stock Exchange operations, with which he was perfectly familiar, having employed them previously on several occasions, he arranged that a very large amount of bullion should be transmitted to London from New York by the splendid steamer *Lucca*, due to start on December 3rd.

It must be understood that this bullion was not to be despatched to Marese, and that he did not appear in the transaction as having any direct connection with it. He had, in fact, arranged to lose a small sum of money, in order to render the importation of bullion particularly profitable in the week ending December 17th—profitable not to him, but to those speculators who deal in

precious metal just as others do in corn or calico. Marese omitted no precaution, spared no pains, and used the whole of his natural and acquired cunning to render this operation a certainty.

The next thing was to tempt the claimants to travel by the steamer *Lucca*. After considerable hesitation, Marese at last determined to open negotiations with the leading men amongst them. He did not do this in his own person, but through his solicitors. It was represented to the managers of the Baskette and Sibbold Lodges that really their claims and the interests of the heir—*i.e.*, Marese—were not so divergent as had been supposed. The heir was quite as much excluded from the enjoyment of the property as they were, and finding the building societies determined, by every means in their power, to put off the day when they must yield up possession, he wished to make common cause against these companies.

Nor was this statement altogether fictitious. The idea of strengthening the hands of the claimants, and making common cause with them, had often occurred to Marese, for the sole purpose of taking the weapons of the companies out of their hands, as Aurelian had advised.

No sooner was this overture on the part of the heir received in America than both Lodges at once responded, and without a moment's hesitation fell into the snare laid for them. To us, who are acquainted with the infamous designs of Marese, such conduct seems almost senile; but it must be remembered that these men on the other side of the Atlantic had not the slightest suspicion of the deadly engine which had been preparing.

To some extent the sudden overture of the heir caused a cessation of hostilities between the two Lodges, and when Marese's second offer arrived they held a species of jubilee. This offer was nothing less than

to convey the whole of the claimants at his own expense, and added that he had already notified to the owners of the *Lucca* that he might require the entire passage accommodation, or nearly, of that vessel. To the Americans this came as an immense boon. There were many of them comparatively poor men, to whom the cost of the voyage was a serious matter, and who had already begun to hesitate at the prospect before them.

The diabolical foresight of Marese and Theodore had guessed as much. They said to each other, "Half the claimants will not come—only those who are tolerably well off. Then what will be the use of our scheme? We shall destroy only a few, and from the remaining individuals a new crop will spring up to vex us. We must get them all—all!"

This offer was accepted with a *fanfaronnade* of gratitude. It had one inestimable advantage—it secured the passage of the

claimants by the vessel Marese had chosen. The enthusiasm on the other side of the Atlantic was raised to its highest pitch when the heir announced his intention of coming to New York in his yacht, to see that the arrangements for his friends were properly carried out.

Preparations were at once made to give him an ovation. The authorities of New York city gave orders to do him honour. The papers published biographies of "this distinguished man, upon whom the eyes of all the world were fixed," and who had lately "covered himself with glory by displaying a grand generosity towards the offshoots of the parent stem."

It often happens that in America the descendants of particular families are gathered in and around certain districts, where they form the main part of the population. This was the case with the Baskettes and Sibbolds. The Baskettes chiefly inhabited Caben, a small township

west of Philadelphia, and the Sibbolds were mostly to be found at Tandanap, near the shores of Lake Michigan. Numbers of both tribes of course were scattered over the whole country, but these were the strongholds. To suit both parties, and to tend to remove the jealousies which had so long raged, it was arranged that all should meet at Imola, a place about midway and within a hundred and twenty miles of New York, about a week previous to the embarkation.

At Imola (named after a Continental town) there resided perhaps the wealthiest member of the Baskette and Sibbold tribes, for he could claim relationship with both—he offered hospitality to them all; and in return it was agreed that this Reginald Bunker Sibbold Baskette, Esq., should be instituted the leader or president of the expedition. After the mobilization of the forces at Imola, the army was to move on New York on the 2nd December, and

embark the same evening on board the *Lucca* steamship.

The whole scheme was now complete, and extremely promising it looked; everything had turned out well. Marese had ascertained by secret inquiries that the bullion had been ordered, and that the owners of the *Lucca* had contracted, under a heavy bond, to deliver it at a certain date. The Lodges had, for a time at least, fused their differences. The engine of destruction was finished, together with a duplicate in case of accident. How extremely simple it looked! Nothing in the world but a strong deal box, apparently nailed together in the usual manner, about a yard square, or a little less. Just such a box as a seaman or passenger, if it chanced to lie about, would choose to sit down on and smoke a pipe. The rough deal planks of which it was made were not even planed smooth—simply a strong packing-case. The conspirators congratulated them-

selves upon the approaching execution of their schemes, and the success which seemed certain to attend them.

But now Theodore discovered a serious oversight. Reading through Aurelian's papers a second time, he came upon that passage which detailed all that could be learnt of the descendants of Arthur Sibbold. This Arthur, Aurelian wrote, or his descendants, was the most dangerous of all. He was the man who ought to have succeeded to the farm which James Sibbold took possession of. James, or James's sons, had not the slightest right to dispose of the farm to Sternhold Baskette; they were selling what did not belong to them. Arthur was of course dead, but Arthur's heirs still lived; and then followed the address and further particulars.

These heirs were at present quiet; but if they discovered the register of Arthur's marriage, Aurelian could not see what was to prevent them from putting in a claim

far superior either to Marese's or to that of any other person. Even if they could not get possession, the Courts would certainly order an immense sum to be paid to them as compensation; and Aurelian thought himself that nothing in the world could prevent them taking the property which stood on the site of the farm, if not the Swamp. The property on the site of the farm, he thought, must go.

"Now," said Theodore, "what is the use of destroying the American claimants *en masse* if this even greater danger is to be allowed to remain close at home, within easy reach of the estate, ready at any moment to burst upon us and render nugatory all our risk and labour?"

Marese was thunderstruck. For a time it seemed that their enemies were hydra-headed—no sooner was one head cut off than three sprouted up in the place. But the man was not one to be daunted. This also must be done, he said. They had not

much time now to lose. It was already the middle of September, and a fortnight must be reckoned for the passage of the yacht to New York. They spent anxious days and nights considering a variety of plans. There is not time to unravel the strange mazes of the mind and trace the genesis of the idea which at last suggested itself to Theodore. It was only one degree less ingenious, and if anything still more horrible, than the infernal machine of Marese.

Theodore still continued the asylum at Stirmingham. It was an important source of income, in fact. In that asylum there were confined lunatics of all degrees of insanity, most of them having wealthy friends, and some the representatives of large properties. Among these was one more remarkable than the rest. He was the representative of a long line of lunatics, or semi-lunatics. Popular tradition accused a progenitor living two centuries before of

a crime too dark to be mentioned, and believed that the lunacy of his descendants was a special punishment from heaven. This particular individual had seemed tolerably sane till he was permitted to marry—a cruel thing. He then rapidly developed his inherited tendencies, living as a married man, left more free from restraint by friends and others.

Though the owner of broad acres and lovely woodlands, he delighted in the society of tinkers, and was himself a clever hand at mending pots and kettles. He had such a fancy for tinkering that he actually promenaded the country for miles in company with gipsies, calling at the farmhouses —on his own tenants—asking for things to mend.

He was also absurdly fond of dogs, and filled the house with them—especially the large mastiff breed, of which he was particularly enraptured, till no one could approach it, and his poor wife was frightened

out of her senses. Tinkering, fondling these dogs, and playing the tin whistle occupied his time. His money he scattered far and wide among the gipsies, pedlars, and tinkers, and gave enormous sums for the pure-bred mastiffs.

The countenance of the man expressed the most intense melancholy—that hopeless incurable vacancy of look which is seen on the features of some monkeys while in captivity. His face, and the shape of his head, in fact, much resembled a monkey's; and the ears protruding from the side of the skull, very large and ill-formed, completed the resemblance. He had a favourite resort in one of the woods surrounding the family mansion. Through this wood there ran a stream, and a tree had fallen across it, making a natural bridge.

On this tree, over the stream, he would perch himself astride, his feet nearly in the water, and play for hours upon the tin whistle, while his troop of dogs disported

in the woods around. He had a wonderful instinct of music, and really played in a marvellous manner upon this simple instrument, exhibiting skill even in the choice of the whistle—for it is difficult to find one that has a mellow tone.

The spectacle of this being, sitting on the tree trunk in the gloom of the woods, his long legs dangling down to the water, with his melancholy baboon face, performing extraordinary fantasias upon a tin whistle, could hardly be matched.

But he was as cunning as he was mad. Probably from his companions, the gipsies, he had learnt that his ancestors had all been confined in the madhouse. He had sufficient sense to foresee that the moment a son was born to his wife he would himself be confined. But, with the inherent insanity of his nature, he thought that by killing the wife or the son he should escape this danger.

So soon as ever the wretched wife's con-

finement approached he slew her—and slew her in true fantastic fashion. With his tinker's hammer he drove a nail into her head as she slept. He fled from the place, but was captured; and that was the last time Odo Lechester used his tinker's hammer for some time to come. The dreadful deed, the sight of blood, had developed in him the homicidal tendency—he tried hard to stab his captors. In Aurelian's asylum at Stirmingham he desperately wounded a warder.

This was the being Theodore selected for his purpose. The man had made many violent attempts to escape—he was like a wild beast in a cage, pacing to and fro.

Theodore went down to Stirmingham to his private residence, which adjoined the asylum, to prepare his tool for the deed. It was easy for him, as a physician and the owner of the establishment, to have full and private access to Odo Lechester. He had a fortnight for his task. In that time he suc-

ceeded in impressing upon Odo's mind that the persons whose name and address he gave him were those who were responsible for his confinement.

It was not his (Theodore's) fault that he was confined—it was the fault of these persons, and upon them the punishment should fall. The man imbibed the idea thoroughly: he brooded over revenge if ever he should get free. His one-sided mind became absorbed in two great overmastering passions —to revenge his captivity, and to recover his favourite dogs.

Theodore assured him that if ever these persons were out of the way he would be at once reinstalled in his position, and might wander at his sweet will, tinkering and playing his whistle.

Theodore's plan was to let this irresponsible murderer out at large upon the world. The obnoxious persons would be removed, and no one could be punished. He arranged for the escape of Odo Lechester at about the

date he and Marese would start for New York.

Their plans were now complete. Theodore, in order to obtain the lunatic's good-will, had restored to him his whistle; and he roamed to and fro in the court of the asylum, examining the high walls, stone by stone, for a crevice of escape, while his rapid fingers manipulated interminable airs of the merriest kind.

* * * * *

When the engineer approached the ancient Swamp with his level and theodolite, and was followed by an army of workmen in short corduroys and slops, who cleared away the rushes and bull-polls, swept off the willow-beds and watercress, drove the water-fowl away and plucked up the reeds and sedges, then the water-rat knew that his time was come. The teeth that had nibbled away at the willow-tree root till it fell and blocked up the stream, would nibble no more. The nimble feet and black eyes

would be seen no more hiding among the flags, or plunging out of sight into the water as a footstep was heard.

The lake which the water-rat had made, with its islands and its cotters, was in its way useful, and not altogether despicable. The poor basket-makers, humble as they were, made good and useful baskets, mended pots and pans, split good clothes-pegs, and injured no man till Sibbold fired that fatal shot.

From that hour a curse seemed to hang over the place. A vast city, full of seething human life, had taken the place of the swamp and the bullrushes; the hearths of the poor cotters were gone, and huge hotels, club-houses, theatres, were there instead. Progress and development—yes; but with development came crime.

Under that overgrown city there extended a system of tunnels, sewers—some large enough to drive a horse and cart down them, others hardly large enough to admit the

hand. But they extended everywhere. Under the busy street, under the quiet office where the only sound was the scratching of the pen, or the buzz of a fly "in th' pane;" under the gay theatre and the gossiping club-house there was not a spot that was not undermined.

And in these subterranean catacombs there dwelt a race nearly as numerous as the human hive above, who worked and gnawed in the dark; they were the domains of the successors of the little furred creatures which nibbled down the ancient willow-tree. The grey sewer-rat worked and multiplied exceedingly beneath this mighty city. The grey rat was worse than the water-rat.

He had his human prototypes. What were Marese and Theodore but sewer-rats working in secret, in the dark underground, out of sight, whose presence could hardly be detected by a faint occasional scratching or rustle?

Beside these there were a numerous com-

pany of lesser men and masculine brutes, and female fiends, burrowing, fighting in the dark places of this mighty city, whose presence was made known at times by faint sounds of shrieking or devilish glee which rose up, as it were, from the bowels of the earth. The reign of the harmless water-rat was over. The rule of the sewer-rat was now in full force.

END OF VOL. I.

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